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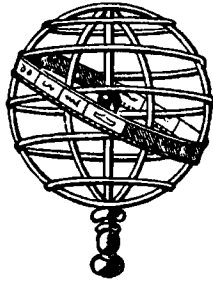
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ZENOBIA?

Vol. II.

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BY FORTUNÉ DU BOISGOBEY.

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WHERE'S ZENOBIA?



IX.

WHEN Lucien found himself in the street, he felt that his strength would not hold out, and he leant for a moment against the garden wall. The boy, who had thus suddenly emerged from the darkness in the cellar, was dazzled by the blinding sunlight, and suffered his deliverer to drag him along without uttering a word.

However, great as was his astonishment, that of the officer was still greater upon failing to see Thérèse, whom he had expected to find in the street. And yet the letter was from her.

He still held it in his hand, and began to read it again. "Your messages have never reached my father," said the young girl's note, which appeared to have been written in great haste. "The one which you sent me by the means that you know of was handed to me by a boy, who accompanied me to the house where you are detained. He knocked at the door, and was seized and dragged in. I went to fetch help, and to write this note, which I hope you will find when I have thrown it into the garden. If you receive it, come out if you can. Your friends beg of you to do so. They are waiting for you; and if the day passes by without you relieving them of their anxiety, they will take other means of delivering you, for they do not doubt but that you are detained against your will. Courage and hope."

There was no signature to this, but Lucien had at once recognised the handwriting, and felt certain that Thérèse herself had thrown the stone over the wall. His heart was overflowing with joy, although there was a great deal that he did not understand in all this. He realised one thing, however, that his betrothed still loved him, and that he was about to see her again. Where and how? He was beginning to ask himself this question when he suddenly thought of questioning the lad whom he had rescued from Saint-Privat and his hirelings.

"Youngster," said he, gently, "it was you, was it not, who picked up a stone at the foot of this wall?"

"Yes, sir, a stone wrapped up in some paper. I read what was written on the paper, and I took the note to the lady this morning?"

"And she came here with you?"

"Yes, sir; and, as we met an old gentleman coming out of the house, the lady asked him if Monsieur Lucien Bellefond lived here, but he said that he did not know, and then he went away."

"It was that wretch Bonnin, no doubt," muttered Lucien. "Go on!"

"Then the lady wanted to knock at the door; but I was afraid to let her do it, and so I——"

"Yes, it was you who knocked; and those rascals took hold of you. But she did not tell you what she was going to do?"

"She did not have time to do so, sir. She must have been as much surprised as I was when they caught me."

"Yes," muttered Lucien; "and then she went in search of some one to deliver me. But how is it that there is no one here?"

The street was empty; there was merely a hackney coach standing at fifty paces or so from the narrow lane at the end of the garden.

The lieutenant realised that he could not remain where he was, and thought that, if the coach were not hired, it would suit him to take it, for he was unable to walk. However, he did not know what address to give to the driver.

To return to his lodgings in the Rue des Bons-Enfants would be very imprudent, according to Saint-Privat, and he had no reason to doubt the spy's assertions in that respect. To go straight to M. Vernède was what Lucien did not dare to do.

He must go somewhere, however, and take with him the poor little fellow of whom Mademoiselle Vernède had spoken in her note.

"You must stay with me, my lad," said he, laying his hand on the humpback's shoulder.

"Yes, sir," said Æsop at once, "and you can lean upon me. Do not be afraid of tiring me. I am not very strong, but I will help you, for all that."

Lucien thanked him with a smile, and went on, leaning on the good little fellow to help himself along. He took care to look back, but he saw that the door of the house remained closed, so that his host had no thought of following him. He listened, also, as he went past the wall over which the letters had passed so luckily, but he heard neither the old man's voice nor that of the fair Clarisse.

If any scene were taking place between Saint-Privat and his daughter, it was with closed doors—unless, indeed, Madame Boutard had already lectured the young lady enough to silence her.

As Lucien went up to the coach he saw with no little regret that it was taken, for the driver was speaking to some one inside. Moreover, as he drew nearer he saw a head at the door.

"Well," said he, philosophically, "it seems that I must walk to the Place Saint-Michel; there I shall no doubt find a vehicle."

And he continued walking on with some difficulty.

He was soon alongside of the coach, which he almost touched, and was proceeding onward when the door suddenly opened. "Get in!" called out a voice which he thought he recognised.

He then stopped short, and saw with amazement the pleasant face of his friend Machefer at the door of the coach. The expurveyor laughed, and at the same time held out his hand. It was no time to ask for an explanation. However, Lucien did not wish to desert the poor lad whom he had rescued, so he pointed him out to Machefer, who at once remarked: "Make the boy get in as well."

Æsop did not need to be urged. He quickly entered the coach, and the invalid then followed, with Machefer's help.

"Then it is to you," began Lucien, "that I owe——"

"Stop a moment, we will talk presently," said his friend, as the young fellow flung himself into his arms. And popping his head out, he called to the driver: "Drive to the Rue du Jour, at the corner of the Rue Montmartre."

"We are going to your house, then?" asked Lucien.

"Yes, of course, and for very good reasons, too. If you tried to go home, you would sleep in prison to-night; and, on the other hand, I don't advise you to go to our friend Vernède's at once."

"It is true, then! he hates me and despises me, and looks upon me as a traitor?"

"No, no; you are going too fast! However, he blames you for your sudden disappearance, and to win his pardon you must explain matters."

"Then she hasn't done so?"

"If by *she* you mean the charming Thérèse, she hasn't. You are surprised that she has not yet told her father all, eh? You expect too much, then. It seems to me that she hasn't lost her time, and that what she did was well done. Let us go back a little. I must explain matters to you. This morning Mademoiselle Vernède was accosted by this little fellow just as she was going to mass. He gave her your letter, which he had picked up on the night before. She followed him to the Rue d'Enfer at once, to inquire for you. She then addressed herself to those who were keeping you in that house. You know what happened. Her messenger was captured, and she narrowly escaped being caught herself. However, she succeeded in getting away, and had the good sense to come and tell everything to your old friend, Timoleon Machefer. It was I who thought it best to throw the reply over the wall."

"It was you, then——"

"Yes, I took the chances of doing so. If I had not succeeded, I should have thought of some other plan. But I did not wish Thérèse to do this herself, and I asked her to let me do it in her place. It was more prudent. Now, let me tell you, Mademoiselle Vernède never ceased to believe that if you did not return it was because you were prevented from doing so, and she always took your part with her father."

"Ah! I knew very well that he blamed me."

"There was a good reason for it, my dear friend. No father

could see his future son-in-law suddenly disappear, and remain away for three weeks without a word, and yet not blame him."

"He will never forgive me, I fear," sighed Lucien.

"I think that he will, for you have an excellent lawyer to plead your cause, and at this very moment, too."

"Do you mean Thérèse?"

"Yes, Thérèse. When she left my house she went home."

"Ah, I hoped that I should see her," murmured Lucien.

"You selfish fellow!" exclaimed Machefer, with a laugh. "You were complaining that you had got into trouble with our friend Vernède, and now that you know you are being defended, you still complain. What else can you desire?"

"I desire to thank you, my kind friend," said Lucien, warmly, "and to tell you my story, so that you may know how I became the victim of fatality."

"Hush!" said the purveyor, putting his finger to his lip. "I also have many things to acquaint you with, but we will talk of all that presently at my house. Tell me, little boy," he added, addressing the humpback, "do you wish to work for your living?"

"Oh, yes, sir, I should be very glad to do so, but I am so weak!"

"No matter. You can read, it appears?"

"And write, too, sir."

"Well, then, I will take charge of you. I will place you in my shop, in the orange department. You can register the boxes from Valencia and Portugal. That's settled; but not a word to my clerks as to how we became acquainted." Then, as the humpback was about to thank him, Machefer added: "Be silent! We have reached the house."

The coach had gone along very rapidly, and they had arrived before Lucien had thought of it.

The shop was on the ground-floor of an old house, in poor condition, but good enough to be used for commercial purposes, and still quite habitable. It was at least two hundred and fifty years old, and had two fronts and two entrances. In the Rue Montmartre was the shop itself, full of oranges and lemons, almonds, barrels of anchovies, and tuns of herrings and dried salted cod. There was a brisk business going on, for Timoleon Machefer's affairs prospered and grew better every day.

Above, on the first floor, there was the office and the cashier's room, which communicated with the shop by an inner staircase.

The private apartments of the dealer were on the two upper floors, and were reached by a door in the Rue du Jour, thus named in a spirit of contradiction, it would seem; for as the church of Saint-Eustache stood near by, casting a huge shadow over it, this street, called "Daylight Street," was really one of the darkest in all Paris.

Thanks to the two distinct entrances, Machefer could always come in and go out without being seen by his customers or even his

clerks. He stopped the coach and sent it away, and took his two companions in by the private entrance. His habits were very simple, and his only servant was an old peasant woman whom he had brought from his own province, and who was quite devoted to him.

He put the little humpback in her charge, and told her to give him some breakfast, and then he led Lucien up to the second floor, to a plain but neatly furnished room.

"You will be perfectly at home here," said he, seating him in a comfortable arm-chair of the so-called "Voltaire" style, "and even better than at home, for no one will come here to look for you, whereas in the Rue des Bons-Enfants——"

"Then my lodgings are really watched?" interrupted the young ex-officer.

"They were watched very closely immediately after your disappearance, but they are not watched so closely now. Still, it would not do to trust to that. You have been pointed out as suspicious."

"By whom?"

"I don't know. I thought at first that you had been denounced as a Freemason; but, as neither I nor any of our friends have been disturbed, I changed my opinion, and I imagine that if the police are looking for you, it must be on account of that individual whom you met one Sunday night at the café of the Rotunda, and who quarrelled with you—the man to whom you so imprudently gave your card. You told me that story some days afterwards, and I did not attach much importance to it at the time, but later on, when I thought of it, I came to the conclusion that that man was a hired bully."

"I think the same."

"And, having your name and address, he, no doubt, handed in a report accusing you of seditious talk, or perhaps of conspiring with other half-pay officers, and advised stern measures with regard to you."

"Yes, it must be so."

"Well, be it as it may, it is certain that you have the police after you, and we came to the conclusion, Vernède and I, that you had been arrested, and that the reason why we had no news of you was that you were in prison, in close confinement."

"No, indeed! my adventure was much stranger than you think."

"I guessed a part of it when I read your letter to Thérèse. I'll wager that you have been fighting a duel," said Machefer.

"Yes, with a Prussian officer."

"It is unnecessary to ask if he was killed. I know your skill, and when you fight the allies you do not miss your mark."

"I killed him, but I received twenty stabs with a knife, and was left for dead."

"What! with a knife?"

"Yes, and in a coach, too. The madman did not wish to fight in any other way; he declared that I had insulted him at cards."

"Ah! So you had been playing, in spite of your fine promises."

"I lost my head, you see. Monsieur Vernède told me that he was embarrassed. I knew that he required three hundred thousand francs."

"And you undertook to supply the money?"

"Did he tell you so?"

"Yes, and I will confess that I was greatly surprised, for I did not believe you to be rich enough to find that amount in a few days' time."

"Alas! I hadn't a third of it by me, and it was to procure the remainder that I went to try my luck at No. 154."

"And fortune deserted you just when you thought that you had succeeded? That's always the way! I am now beginning to understand your adventures, that is, with the exception of those which followed your duel in the coach. How is it that we found you in a house in the Rue d'Enfer?"

"I was taken there when I became insensible."

"Who took you there?"

"A man whom I met at the Palais-Royal when the quarrel began, and who acted as my second."

"A Frenchman?"

"Yes, an old man. His name is Bonnin. He made a small fortune in business, and owns that house, but doesn't live there."

"And did he take care of you?"

"Yes, and his housekeeper attended to my wounds. He did not wish to call in a doctor for fear of bringing trouble upon himself. The death of the Prussian must have been talked about, and——"

"He was certainly a very prudent man," interrupted Machefer. "But tell me, why did this charitable gentleman intercept your letters to Vernède, for we suppose from your letter to Thérèse that he did suppress them."

"You are right. I wrote three letters before penning the one that so miraculously reached Mademoiselle Vernède, and he burned all three."

"How charming! You were kept, it seems, like a State prisoner. And the person who asked for you was seized upon! Why that house must be a Bastille, and the man must have wished to keep you there for ever."

"You see that he didn't, as he let me go when I desired."

"Then I cannot understand it all, and you will do me a great favour by explaining this mystery."

"I do not clearly understand it myself, for I have not yet had time to think it over. I did not know till an hour ago that Monsieur Bonnin had suppressed my letters, and I fancied that I was perfectly free. However, I have reasons for thinking that he had a personal interest in keeping me with him whilst allowing me to suppose that I was free to go."

"What was this personal interest?"

"It is somewhat difficult to explain ; but I will try to make you understand. You must know that this man Bonnin came up to me in the Palais-Royal to propose a very strange bargain to me."

"A bargain ?"

"Yes, you know that I had an uncle."

"Colonel Lacaussade, who was killed at the battle of the Beresina ?" asked Machefer.

"Exactly. Well, Bonnin asserts that my uncle has left me his entire fortune by a will which is now in the hands of a person known to him."

"And he offers to obtain that will for you ?"

"Yes, on condition that I will give him——"

"A million ?"

"How do you know that the sum he demands is a million ?" asked Lucien, greatly surprised.

"I will tell you," replied Machefer, whose face displayed an undefinable emotion ; "but, first of all, tell me what is the appearance of this Monsieur Bonnin ?"

"He is of medium height, with so insignificant a face that it is hard to describe it. So far as I can tell, he must be between fifty and sixty."

"Hasn't he got grey eyes ?"

"Yes, cat's eyes ; only they never shine."

"Good ! and what kind of a voice ?"

"A hoarse voice, without any other special characteristic."

"That is the man, then !"

"Ah ! do you know him ?"

"I have perhaps seen him. But, first of all, tell me did he mention the name of the person who, according to his account, is in possession of your uncle's will ?"

"He took good care not to do that. It is his secret—the secret that he proposes to sell me."

"Ah ! I see. Well, did he offer to bring this person to you ?"

"No ; but he undertakes to procure the will from this person, and then to bring it to me."

"Immediately ?"

"No, but in a very short time, when he returns from a journey which will last a fortnight, or a month at the most."

"I have no further doubt now !" exclaimed the provision dealer, who had become more and more excited.

"What do you mean ? Pray, explain yourself. You are killing me with your mysterious ways."

"Lucien, my dear Lucien," exclaimed Machefer, "recall all that you can, and answer the question that I am about to ask of you. Do you know, or have you ever known, a woman who bears the strange name of Zenobia Capitaine ?"

"Zenobia Capitaine ?" repeated Lucien. "It does seem to me that that strange-sounding name isn't unfamiliar."

"Try to remember," said Machefer; "it is of the utmost importance."

"Wait a moment! I think that formerly, during my childhood, there was—yes—that is it—there was a good woman who used to tell me stories to send me to sleep, and who was called Mother Zenobia. She was the widow of a man named Capitaine, who had formerly served in the Gardes Françaises, and been my uncle's gamekeeper."

"Good! and what did she do?"

"I do not remember very clearly. She must have left the country when I was not more than eight or ten years old. Wait a moment! Ah! I remember now. She went away as a sutler-woman with the battery commanded by my uncle at Marengo, and afterwards she was with him during all his campaigns, and among others, the Russian one."

"Ah! I was sure of it!"

"I think too, that she was killed; for I remember now that last year one of my countrymen passing through Paris told me that no news had ever been had of her or of the colonel."

"That is it!" exclaimed Machefer. "Well, do you know, my boy, I think that luck has returned to us?"

"Will you be kind enough to explain your questions and exclamations?" said Lucien, who was completely puzzled.

"Yes, certainly, I will explain; but you must expect to be surprised and delighted. You disappeared one Sunday, did you not?"

"On the 9th of July. I had the happiness of passing the day with Monsieur Vernède and his daughter, and I have not seen them since, for I met the Prussian that night at the card-table."

"And you ruined yourself; you fought, and then you were taken to the Rue d'Enfer?"

"Yes, to Monsieur Bonnin's house, which I did not leave!"

"Well, then, on the following day, which was Monday, I went to spend an hour at the little café where I usually go after breakfast. When in Spain, I got used to taking a short nap in the afternoon."

"Isn't the café in the Rue des Bourdonnais?"

"Yes, at a few steps from our friend Vernède's house."

"I have been there once or twice," said Lucien.

"Yes, I remember. Then you must have noticed that the master of the house and the waiter shouted whenever they spoke to me, as though I were deaf."

"Yes."

"They think that I am deaf. I sometimes indulge in this joke, which is an excellent precaution at the same time. When a man conspires, it is as well not to neglect these little matters. On this famous Monday I was there, in my usual corner, and I had begun to doze over my newspaper. All at once, however, I saw a person come in, whom I had already seen several times, and whom I knew to be a detective—untidy linen, an uneasy look, and a sly face. The

fellow seated himself at a table near me, and asked for some beer and a couple of glasses. He expected some one. This already interested me, although I did not suspect anything. Then I shut my eyes again, but, as you may readily guess, I did not sleep at all."

"But what has this story to do with——" began Lucien.

"You are in the deuce of a hurry. Let me finish, if you want to find out. I was saying that I pretended to sleep. An hour later, the man whom the spy was waiting for arrived. He was dressed like an old trooper, and disguised to perfection. Any one else might have been deceived, and I can tell you that the fellow is extremely cunning. However, I am not a man to be taken in like that, and I found him out by the way in which he held his head when he was seated. He had one eye upon his comrade, and one upon those around him."

"Well, what did he do, this sham soldier?" asked Lucien, who was beginning to feel interested.

"He began by suggesting that he should take the other man away, so as to talk without being overheard; but the fool, who is in the habit of coming to the café, assured him that I was as deaf as a post, and he believed it. Then they began to talk aloud, and at times also in a low tone, but as I have sharp ears, I did not lose a word. They talked about spying. The sham trooper had been watching at the post-office, and had been watched himself in his turn, and followed by a man who, so he suspected, belonged to the high political police. There was a woman in the matter—a woman who had gone to ask for a letter under the name of Zenobia."

"That is strange, indeed! The name isn't common, and this may concern the sutler-woman."

"Not so fast! There was nothing more said just then as to this Zenobia, whose first name only was mentioned. But the old trooper also asked his companion if the police had heard of a duel between a Frenchman and a Prussian."

"He asked that on Monday, and I had only fought on Sunday night! No one but Monsieur Bonnin himself could have known of it. Can this detective, disguised as an old soldier, have been he?"

"You will see. His confederate told him that nothing of the kind had been heard of; that they had merely found a foreign soldier who had been murdered in a coach."

"Murdered? He lied!" exclaimed Lucien.

"Well, all this, as you may suppose, did not interest me much, and I merely listened as a matter of duty rather than with any real hope of hearing anything that might be useful to the masons. All at once, however, your name was uttered."

"My name?"

"Yes; the oldest asked the other one if he knew a half-pay lieutenant named Lucien Bellefond, who was being watched on account of politics; the other said no, but added that he would make

inquiries, and the rascals separated, promising to meet at the same place on the following Monday at noon."

"Did you return there?"

"You need not ask. I even made an earlier breakfast so as not to lose so good a chance."

"And what did you find out?"

"This time your name was not mentioned, and they said nothing more about the duel in the coach, but they said a great deal about this Zenobia, and I learned that her surname was Capitaine. I also know what the false soldier, whom I recognised, wants to get from her. On this second occasion he was dressed in a blue coat, nankeen pants, and he had shoes with silver buckles."

"It is the same man, then; it is Bonnin himself!" exclaimed Lucien, in no little surprise.

"Of course; but listen. I am now coming to the strangest part of the adventure. The man in the blue coat spoke out frankly to his confederate. He had already told him a couple of weeks before to try and find this Zenobia, but he had not, it seems, told him why he was looking for her. At this second meeting he told him the facts, no doubt to stimulate his zeal by promising him a portion of the booty. It seems that this Zenobia has possession of a will which leaves a large fortune, two millions at least——"

"Exactly the sum that Bonnin mentioned as bequeathed to me by my uncle's will."

"Which leaves it to an individual who is not the heir-at-law, and who is entirely ignorant of the existence of the will."

"My case exactly!"

"The man added that he had this heir in his power, and that he intended to obtain one-half of the fortune by means of a written agreement."

"Yes; one million."

"But he had not yet found Zenobia. He wished to find her at all costs, and he promised his confederate five per cent. on his million if he found her before the end of the month."

"I now understand why he did not urge me to sign sooner," said Lucien."

"The confederate promised to do his best, as you may suppose, and they parted."

"But you knew all?"

"I knew nothing, on the contrary; and their conversation worried me very much, though I could not guess that it related to you. It is even a miracle that I remember the details, and you see that it is as well to have a good memory. Just now, when you spoke of the colonel's will, and Bonnin's proposition, the story of the other day returned to me, and the name of Zenobia Capitaine was a flash of light."

"Then you believe that this woman has my uncle's will in her possession?"

"It is as clear as day."

"But if she died in Russia, what then?"

"What do you know about that? It has been asserted that she is dead, that is true; but every day soldiers return who were made prisoners during the retreat. I firmly believe that this detective, who is speculating upon other people's money, did not waste his time in telling his confederate a mere falsehood; I believe that the sutler-woman has recently returned to France. What could be more natural than that your uncle should have confided his will to her? She had followed him through all his campaigns, as you yourself have just told me. She came from the same part of the country, and had been known to you from childhood. She was with him when he died."

"All that is possible, indeed," said Lucien, "but I wonder why she did not tell me of her return, and why this secret is known to Monsieur Bonnin; for I have no doubt now but what the detective whom you saw and the man in the Rue d'Enfer are one and the same person."

"I don't know or care how all that is," replied Machefer, "as you can now dispense with this man. We shall find Zenobia Capitaine without him. She will give you the will, and you will pocket the two millions without being obliged to part with one of them. Vernède will be saved, and his daughter will be happy."

"Yes," said Lucien, "all that I have will belong to Monsieur Vernède; but I shall only have but half of the inheritance, for I have signed a promise to give a million to this Bonnin."

"What! have you committed such an act of folly as that?"

"Alas! yes; I have signed the paper. It happened only an hour ago. It is really a fatality! I had just put my name to it when that stone fell at my feet—one minute too late."

"The devil take your haste! Couldn't you wait before delivering yourself up to this man, tied hand and foot?"

"What would you have? I believed that I was deserted by one and all. I had written in vain."

"Didn't it ever occur to you that this rascal had intercepted your correspondence? Love must have prevented you from reasoning."

"I believe it did."

"To lose a million for want of thought! That is hard!"

"True; but what is to be done?"

The purveyor at first said nothing. He was walking up and down the room, stamping and muttering to himself. "No; he shall not have that money—the rascal shall not have it!" he cried at last. "A paper of that kind is of no account—no court would approve of it. A man cannot sell his patrimony for a mess of pottage. That was all very well in Esau's time, but it won't do now. Why did not that occur to me at once? Come, my dear boy, do not be alarmed. The mistake that you have made is of no

consequence, for, if Bonnin has the impudence to claim this money, you can send him to the devil."

"You are mistaken," replied the lieutenant; "I shall be obliged to keep the contract, unfortunately."

"Why, since I tell you that——"

"Because I gave my word of honour not to dispute the validity of the paper."

"What in the name of sense did you do that for? You must be insane, utterly insane!"

"That may be; but it is done. I shall keep my word."

"Good! And what if I, who have not given my word, should go to that rascal's house, that den of his, and make him give me back the paper by threatening to thrash him?"

"I gave him my word that he should not be troubled by me or mine."

"You must have sworn to ruin yourself, it appears to me!"

"I did not know the situation," began Lucien. "If I had——"

Machefer raised his hands towards heaven, and resumed his furious promenade, muttering the most frightful oaths to himself. All at once, however, he stopped, for a fresh idea had occurred to him. "But what did you agree to do? Wasn't it to give the million in exchange for the delivery of the will?"

"Yes; such are the terms of the agreement that he made me sign."

"Then, if this Bonnin does not hand you the will you will owe him nothing?"

"Of course not."

"Well, then, we are saved; and the scoundrel will not be able to rob you of half your fortune."

"I have told you that I shall not break my word."

"You need not break it; be easy as to that; for the man cannot sell you a will that he has not got."

"How? What do you mean?"

"I know where the will is. The sutler-woman has it. That is as clear as anything can be. Now, she would rather give it to you than to an adventurer whom she does not know."

"I did not think of that," muttered Lucien.

"It is very simple. You can say to this Bonnin: 'I was quite willing to pay you the price agreed upon for the will. But you have not got it, whereas I have. So we are quits.'"

"I do not really know whether that would be fair."

"You must be joking. In the first place, no one need trouble himself about such a rascal as that. He would not have failed to steal all your uncle left, if he could have done so; and I don't see that even the most scrupulous conscience can find any fault with what I say. You swore to purchase the will—well and good; but the will has to be handed to you. There is a kind of race after an inheritance in all this. So much the worse for Bonnin if he is left in the lurch."

"The fact is that he would be well caught, and could not complain. But are you really sure that it is this Zenobia Capitaine who has my uncle's will?"

"Who the deuce can it be, if it isn't she? Have you forgotten what I told you about what I heard at the café. You may be sure that Bonnin would not disturb himself about the sutler-woman if she hadn't got your fortune in her hands."

"From what you tell me, he is not the only one who is looking for her, as another detective went to the post-office also."

"Don't let us mix up the matter; it is complicated enough as it is. Everything goes to show that the most fortunate chance in the world has put me upon the right track, and that all we now have to do is to find this Zenobia Capitaine."

"That may not be so easy as you fancy, as Bonnin has not yet found her. He must have looked everywhere for her; and if, as you think, he really is a detective, he must have facilities for action that you have not got."

"Bah! I will find other ways, and, besides, I have an advantage over him, which is that I am not afraid of anything; whereas, I'll venture to say that he is afraid of everything."

"It can be no small matter to find a woman whom one doesn't know in this vast city."

"Who said that we should find her in Paris? She isn't here, I am sure of it."

"What makes you think so?"

"If she were, she would have begun by making herself known, as she would only have come here to fulfil the mission given her by the colonel."

"Letters don't always reach their addresses. I know that; and I suppose that, like me, you believe in the existence of the dark room."

"Of course; and it may be that, as a conspirator, you have already been pointed out to those who unseal the letters; but let us go on to other proofs. What did Bonnin say when you left him? It is impossible that he let you go without asking where he should be able to find you, so as to hand you the will."

"Oh! yes; he inquired very anxiously about my plans, and I told him to write to me or call at Monsieur Vernède's house."

"You did wrong," said Machefer, at once. "You should not have given our friend's address to a spy."

"You forget that he already knew it," replied Lucien.

"From the letters which you confided to him, and which he intercepted? True, I had forgotten that. Well, I hope that no great harm is done. But, at all events, you will do as well to warn Vernède. Now, didn't Bonnin say that he was going away?"

"Yes; and he admitted that he was going to get the will, which was not yet in his possession."

"Good! and how long did he say that the journey would last?"

"From two to three weeks."

"That is it."

"What do you mean?"

"It takes four or five days to go to Périgueux, and as long to return. That makes ten. It will be enough for him to talk with the sutler-woman, and induce her to give him your uncle's last will and testament."

"Then you think that the woman is at Périgueux?"

"I am sure of it. Where can she be, as she is not in Paris? She must have gone to her own part of the country when she returned from Russia, for she must have relied upon obtaining some information about you there."

"She will certainly hear of me if she goes to the overseer at the Château Lévêque, not far from the city."

"Does he know your present address?"

"No; I have not written to him for a year past, and, when I did, I was not living in the Rue des Bons-Enfants."

"So you see that Zenobia may not know where you are, and that is probably the reason why she has not given any sign of life."

"It may be so."

"And, since you did not go after her, you run a great risk of not seeing her for a long time; or, what is still worse, of letting the old rascal in the Rue d'Enfer get ahead of you."

"Then you advise me to go to Périgueux?"

"You must be crazy!"

"But it seems to me what you say amounts to that?"

"I said that it seemed to me urgent to be beforehand with Bonnin as regards Zenobia Capitaine; but heaven forbid that I should advise you to undertake the journey yourself! To begin with, you are much too weak to travel, and, besides, it would be very imprudent. You have been denounced as an enemy of the government, that is evident, as your lodgings have been watched. A description of your person must have been sent to the police, and especially to head-quarters, in your own part of the country. So you would be arrested as soon as you left the coach."

"What shall I do, then?"

"You are really very much at a loss, are you not? Any one would think that there was not one to go to Périgueux in your stead."

"Yes; but in a matter of this kind it is not easy to find any one to act in one's own place."

"But you have some one to act in your place."

"Who can it be?"

"Why, it is I, you great goose!" said Machefer, laughing.

"What! will you go in my place?" exclaimed Lucien.

"Yes. Does that surprise you? It needn't. What is the use of having friends if they are not to be relied upon in such a case as this?"

"I recognise you in this, my dear friend, and I thank you with all my heart, but——"

"But what?"

"I do not know whether I ought to accept your generous offer."

"You do not trust me or my ability, it seems."

"No, it isn't that, of course, but I don't want you to give up your business on my account."

"Give up my business! What are you talking about? It would be a pity if my shop could not be left for a short time, and it is clear that you do not know what business is. Remember that there isn't a year during which I don't go off two or three times for a couple of weeks to buy oranges at Marseilles or cod at Granville. I have my cashier, old Frantz, who formerly served in the dragoons; and, when I am not there, he manages everybody just as he used to manage his platoon, and things go on all the better; for I am too good-natured and obliging with the clerks and customers. So don't worry yourself about my business. It won't suffer by my journey, and your interests will gain by it. Now, it is all settled, and I shall go."

"When?"

"To-night, of course," replied Machefer.

"To-night?"

"Yes, I think that it is best to take the bull by the horns, and, besides, I don't want to let Bonnin get ahead of me. He won't lose any time, you may be sure of that."

"The fact is, that if you believe in the utility of this journey, it is best not to put it off."

"I do believe in it—that is to say, I will bet a hundred louis to one that I shall find Zenobia before the end of the week, and bring you the will in a fortnight from now."

"You were speaking just now of the dangers to which I should be exposed in going there. Won't you be incurring the same dangers?"

"Not at all, my dear friend, not at all. I have been a mason, it is true, and I am still a mason, although our meetings are suspended for the time being, but I am not pointed out to the police; and as the spy whom we walled up is not here to denounce me——"

"You bring back a frightful remembrance," exclaimed Lucien.

"Bah! we only carried out our laws with regard to him, and he fully deserved to be walled up, I assure you. However, let us return to our affair. I need not fear being recognised, and, besides, I have a passport in perfect form, made out in the name of Timoleon Machefer, provision dealer. To defy all the commissaries and mounted police in France and Navarre, I need only have it looked at and viséd for Périgueux, which I shall do at once. I will then engage a seat at the Messageries Royales, and I shall return here to pack my trunk and bid you good-bye. Then off I go."

"You are prompt, I must say."

"I had to hurry much faster when I was with the army in Germany."

"But, admitting that you leave without any trouble, how will you discover this woman in a town where you are a stranger, for you have never been to Périgueux that I know of, and have no acquaintances there?"

"No, and I can do very well without that."

"Remember that I cannot give you the slightest information. I don't know where Madame Capitaine may have gone, and I cannot describe her to you, for I have not seen her for fifteen years past, and she must have greatly changed since the time she used to tell me stories. You may, however, perhaps find out something from the man who rents my farm."

"Don't be alarmed, my friend. I am an old fox and I know how to find chickens. I only ask you for one thing."

"What is that?"

"Something to make the sutler-woman recognise me as your friend."

"Oh! I will write a letter that you can take with you," replied Lucien, promptly.

"No. A letter from you might compromise me under certain circumstances. I might be arrested and searched. We must think of everything. As a general rule, my dear Lucien, it is best to write as little as possible. I should prefer some object which the police wouldn't notice, but which would be significant in Zenobia's eyes."

"I don't know what in the world to give you. You might say that my favourite story was 'Tom Thumb?'"

"That would not be sufficiently conclusive. Zenobia would not think that enough. Haven't you not got some ring—some family jewel—that is known to her?"

"No, I haven't. But wait a moment. It seems to me that when she was going to Marengo she gave me—yes, I remember now!" suddenly exclaimed Lucien, unbuttoning his vest, "she gave me this medal of Notre Dame de Fourvières."

And he hastily broke the silken cord by which a little oval medallion hung about his neck.

"Do you see this cross cut with the point of a knife upon it?" he asked. "She gave it to me, saying that the sign would bring me good luck. And the fact is," added the officer, lowering his voice, "that it has done so, for I have been on the battle-field scores of times since she gave it me, and I never had any wound but a very slight one in the leg——"

"And a dozen stabs with a knife in a coach," interrupted the purveyor, with a laugh. "But I'm not sneering. I have seen men in the army who always wore some such medal, and were glad that they did so. But you must make up your mind to part with this one for a time, for I cannot imagine a better passport to Zenobia's favour."

"Take it," said Lucien, eagerly, "and may it help you! You really mean to go to-night, then?" he added.

"Yes, my friend, and I can read a great many questions in your face which you don't like to ask. The first relates to the charming Thérèse, eh?"

"I confess that it will be very painful to me if I don't see her during your absence."

"You shall see her, but not at her own house."

"What! would she come here? Would her father consent?"

"Her father must now know a part of your adventures, as Mademoiselle Vernède went home after telling me all that she herself knew about them. However, I am now going to see my old friend Thomas, to tell him that I am going away and to explain your case to him—I do not say to plead your cause, for it is won already. Thérèse is a good lawyer, mind."

"Then you will beg of him not to desert me?"

"I will tell him that it is absolutely necessary for you to remain here until my return, and that it would be too cruel to leave you alone here. And I am sure that Vernède will not need any urging to keep you company; for, although he has some cause to complain, he has always been greatly attached to you. This man, who is as cold as marble outwardly, had tears in his eyes whenever he spoke of you. Ah! you may be sure that he is fond of you."

"I am as much attached to him as he is to me, and I esteem him greatly," replied Lucien, with an embarrassed air. "Do you think that he would allow——"

"I know what you are going to ask," interrupted Machefer, laughingly. "You wish to know whether his daughter will come with him to see you? Well, I will undertake to promise that she will."

"Oh, my friend, if you can bring that about, I——"

"I shall not even need to ask it; I am sure that Vernède has already promised Thérèse to bring her here; I am also sure that he will approve of my journey to Périgueux, and between ourselves, whether it prove successful or not, I am sure that Thomas does not desire any son-in-law but yourself."

"He will forgive me then, you think?"

"What! for having gambled? When he knows that you did so to try and win the hundred thousand crowns for him, it would be very cruel on his part if he reproached you. And as for the Prussian whom you have killed, he will congratulate you as to that instead of blaming you. Now that you are comforted, let us say a few words more to the purpose. You must remain in this room, where you will be attended by an old servant, in whom you can place entire confidence. Frantz, my cashier, whom I will introduce to you presently, will see that you want for nothing. The little humpback will attend you, also, if he is discreet. I shall

place him under Frantz's supervision to-day. I now come to the visits that interest you the most. You may have noticed that this house has two entrances. Our friend Vernède is perfectly well acquainted with the one by which we came in. He can come with his charming daughter by the little entrance in the Rue du Jour, and get in without being noticed. But you must positively promise me not to go out till I return."

"Am I being searched for with so much vigilance, then?" asked the young ex-lieutenant.

"I don't know, but prudence is the parent of safety. You have a proper asylum here, and you don't need to expose yourself for the sake of taking the air in the street."

"I have no desire to do so."

"It seems to me that you will not die of weariness, thanks to our friends in the Rue des Bourdonnais. Now that I have said all, I must go. I have scarcely time to get it all accomplished. The coach will start at six, and it is past twelve already. I will see you again soon. I will now tell Jeannette to bring you up some breakfast."

"Thanks; I am not hungry," sighed the lover. And he added, pressing the hand which Machefer held out to him: "You will write to me when you are down there, won't you?"

"Yes," replied Machefer, "but under cover to Frantz, for your name is known, and I mistrust the postal service."

Then the provision dealer, taking up his hat, hastened away to secure a seat in the coach which would convey him where he hoped to find Zenobia Capitaine.

X.

“TO THE BARONESS DE SAINTE-GAUBURGE,
 “16 Rue de la Grange Batelière, Paris,

“PÉRIGUEUX, 5th August, 1815.

“My dear Zoé,—I promised to write to you when I started, and I now add to that weakness the still greater one of keeping my promise. I cannot refuse anything to women. The Duke of Otranto, our illustrious patron, has often reproached me on that account. But you are not like other women, for you are working for the same cause that I am; besides, you are personally interested in the success of the expedition which I have undertaken, as you will help me to spend the inheritance of my dear uncle whenever I succeed in getting it; and I confess that, although I am not naturally talkative, I long to tell you my adventures. They will amuse you, and besides, later on you can perhaps give me some information which will explain them.

“So, without further preamble, I will at once begin at the beginning. You know that on Tuesday evening, after a sweet kiss from you, I started off by the coach for Périgueux, provided with a passport in the name of Jean Gardilan, horse-dealer, and with a letter of recommendation from Fouché to the civil and military authorities. We were full, but I had the best seat in the right corner. The other corner was occupied by a respectable old man, with a nice-looking suit, and gold spectacles. In the middle there was a stout man of forty, as round as an apple and as gay as a lark.

“I took a good look at both of them without seeming to do so. I have to keep my eyes from growing dull, you know. The stout man, who was red and puffy, could only be a travelling agent or a tradesman, I thought, and he took the trouble, indeed, to tell me all about himself before we had passed the Barrière. He said that he sold truffles, and was going to Périgueux to treat with the peasantry for a large quantity of these interesting tubercules, to be delivered to him next December. And it is really a shame that this is not the truffle season, for you would like some, my fair friend, I have no doubt of it; and if this had been the right time I could have brought you some.

“I saw at once that my neighbour was telling the truth, and I felt the more sure of him from the fact that he was as deaf as a post. He talked a great deal, but heard very little. As for the respectable old man in the left corner, that was not altogether the same thing.

He vainly assumed a simple look. I mistrusted his nose. It was a big nose, round at the end, and although it looked innocent enough at first sight, it seemed to me as if it grew small or large at will like an india-rubber nose. I imagined that I had seen it once before, when it had an aquiline shape. Where? I could not remember. I said to myself, however, that I would study it the next day, and I then went to sleep. I need not add that I saw you in my dreams.

"The next day at breakfast, at Orleans, I made use of my amiability to get my two companions to talk, and I venture to say that I was to a certain degree successful. The truffle-seller, especially, seemed to take to me, although his infirmity obliged him to laugh very often without knowing what for; however, between the dessert and the coffee he swore an eternal friendship for me. The old man with the spectacles was more reserved. But he made no difficulty about informing those present that he was going to Périgueux on account of a lawsuit, and that he had retired from business, and lived in the Marais district of Paris.

"While he was talking on, I kept on examining him, and the more I did so the more plainly did I realise that his face was made up. He had made his forehead look lower by donning an ugly red wig, and he had gold spectacles with glasses an inch thick. I said to myself that if I could only see his eyes without those glasses I should know him at once. It ran in my head to such a degree that I made up my mind to resort to extreme measures to bring it about.

"All at once the conductor called out: 'Get in, gentlemen!' We then left the table in haste, jostling one another, and on passing out at the door I found myself beside the worthy old man. By catching my own eye-glass in his ribbon as I twirled it round—a trick that I learned in London—I removed his glasses and sent them three yards off. The old man darted after them, and hastily picked them up. This was a first proof. A near-sighted man would not have known where they had fallen. But before he had put them on again I knew everything. His eyes met mine, and that was all I needed to recognise him.

"Guess who it was! I will allow you a hundred or even a thousand guesses, or rather I will tell you at once, to save you the trouble of guessing. It was the same old rascal who undertook to follow me three weeks ago, and who then wore the disguise of an old trooper. He followed me from the Rue Jean-Jacques-Rousseau to the Palais-Royal. I told you about it. You know it was on the very day when I went with Zulma, your former maid, to the post-office. Don't be jealous, as it was all on account of the inheritance. Yes, my dear Zoé, that old rascal, that monkey in spectacles, that sham soldier who escaped me at the Tuileries, were all one and the same. I never more bitterly regretted that he had not been killed under the balcony of the palace.

"The serious part of this encounter need not be explained to so

able a woman as yourself, my dear baroness. This rascal who had ventured to mount guard at the post-office at the same time as myself, and who went off to Périgueux twenty days later, was evidently looking for Zenobia Capitaine, the woman mentioned to me by my uncle's agent. You will tell me, my adored Zoé, that this is all mere imagination. But I am far too keen to believe that, and I shall soon have proof of it.

"I hasten to reassure you on one point. Although he saw me closely on the morning when I followed him, after he had followed me, he did not recognise me—of that I am sure. It is true that I had surpassed myself this time in making up my face. My hair was as black as jet, and as short as that of the 'Corsican ogre,' while my black moustache was cut like a scrubbing-brush. My complexion was dark also, and I looked like a young guardsman. If Ney or Labédoyère saw me, they would shake hands with me at once. With regard to Labédoyère, there is a rumour here that he has already been arrested in Paris. I should not be sorry if this were the fact, as it would greatly simplify my political work, and I should have more time for the matter of my inheritance, which interests me a great deal more than the affairs of His Majesty Louis XVIII. However, do not say so to Fouché.

"To return to that scamp, while wondering how it was that he was upon my path again, I thought of playing him a good trick; and I really fancied that I had got rid of him yesterday morning. We had passed Limoges, and were going up a never-ending hill. All the passengers had alighted, and the spectacléd serpent was some way behind. At the top of the hill, when we were going to get in again, I told my friend the truffle-seller and the conductor that the third occupant had gone ahead, and that we should find him on the other side of the hill. We drove on, and of course we did not catch him up, as he had remained in the rear. Meanwhile, I laughed in my sleeve, and I said to myself: 'When I reach Périgueux, old boy, you will still be in the suburbs of Limoges.' And this seemed all the more certain, as the conductor remarked when we reached the next stage that it was all the worse for the fool, and that he could not wait. But alas! he caught us up at a place called La Coquille. He had succeeded in hiring a peasant's cart with two little horses that went like the wind. He is a determined fellow. Do you not agree with me, baroness?

"Well, I was so surprised that I did not worry him again during the journey. I spent my time in talking to the truffle-seller, who is a guileless being, and I changed my batteries. It is evident that the man with the spectacles is more dangerous than I had thought. I cannot help believing that he belongs to the 'house,' although I do not remember ever having seen him there. Still, he looks like a detective. I wondered whether his excellency on the Quai Malaquais could have sent him after me while I attend to my mission. The dear duke does such things at times.

"But I shall soon know for certain, for I am going to the prefect to-morrow to show my papers and ask for his help and protection, and I shall tell him that there was a suspicious-looking man in the coach with me. I shall be very unlucky if I do not succeed in having the fool arrested and put in prison, or sent back to Paris as an agent of the usurper.

"We all alighted—he, I, and the truffle-dealer—and went to Plumejault's hotel, where we dined side by side. I do not wish to lose sight of the fellow till I send him to a safe place. He is full of confidence, I believe, and willingly honours the dealer with his conversation; and the latter, who is a very good fellow, although simple, answers him half the time without knowing what he is saying.

"I don't think that this part of the country will please me much, being so far from you, although I was born here, and played here in my boyhood. But I do not care for all that now. Besides, the town is not a handsome one, by any means. However, what cookery, my dear baroness, what cookery! one ought to eat it on one's knees. We have no truffles, it is true, for they do not come in for three months yet, but just now we had a dish of mushrooms, and I sent for some Bergerac wine. It was splendid! I must send you some, it is so good.

"In the meantime, my fair Zoé, I kneel at your divine feet and offer you the heart of a horse-dealer, such as I now appear to the others, and I long for nothing save to be able to bring you the Golden Fleece. It is in the pocket of a sutler-woman, whom I shall tame, I trust. Jason, you know, tamed the dragon which guarded the Hesperides. When once I have got the will from her and have burnt it, matters will go on swimmingly, for she must have brought the certificate of my uncle's death; and I need then only take possession of the property.

"Two millions, baroness! do you feel all the force of those words, and can you count how many dainty suppers at the Rocher de Cancale such a sum would pay for? It seems to me as though I were already there. I will write soon again. For the present, I send you a kiss, and remain, your devoted

"MAXIME TRIMOULAC."

"MADAME JULIE BOUTARD,
"93 Rue d'Enfer, Paris."

"PÉRIGUEUX, 5th August, 1815.

"My dear Julie,—The devil take the stupid girl who dared to throw stones into my garden the other day! But for her our heir would still be under your care, and I should at least be easy as to that; but now I see trouble everywhere. This beginning will show you that my journey has not been uneventful, although I have arrived here safe and sound. I hasten to add that there is nothing lost, nor

even endangered. But perhaps some one has divined my purpose. I fear that I started a day too late.

"This is what has happened : I had, as you know, engaged a seat. We were full. I had two other passengers with me in the coupé, and I naturally looked at them. Would you believe that I at once recognised a face—that of a man whom I have seen twice already at the little café where I sometimes go in the Rue de Bourdonnais ! I should have preferred it if he had not been with me ; but he is so deaf and stupid that it does not matter. He is the less to be feared from the fact that I was disguised when I went to the café to meet Cornillon, and he cannot recognise me now, with my lawyer-like look, my white tie, and gold spectacles. However, matters became more complicated, as you will soon see.

"My other companion was a tall, long-legged fellow, with waxed moustaches, and a far from pleasant face. He was as dark as an Italian, and had bad, treacherous eyes. Scarcely was I seated than I pretended to doze off in my corner so as to watch him at my ease, and every time that I looked over my neighbour's head to do so, I met his wicked eyes fixed upon me. He was watching me, the rascal ! That was evident. But why ? I couldn't guess.

"On the morrow, at Orleans, we were coming from the breakfast table when the man contrived to pass me, and at the same time he made my spectacles fall off without seemingly intending to do so. He made me a number of apologies ; but I understood the trick, and I vowed that I would find out who the fellow was. It seemed to me that I had met him somewhere before, but I could not remember where it was that I had seen his hypocritical countenance. At last, in the afternoon, the heat being intense, he went to sleep in his corner. The sun shone full upon him, and then what did I see ? A mole in the very middle of the right cheek, with some hairs upon it—hairs that were almost red. This was a flash of light, as it were, and I examined the fellow's complexion, which I now saw clearly. He was fair, with thousands of little freckles, and when he opened his eyes I saw that they were of a greenish grey. With this, however, he had hair, eyebrows, and moustache as black as a raven's wing. He could not take me in, I assure you !

"I now felt sure that the scamp had made up his face. I had something to go upon. It was necessary for me to reconstruct him in my mind's eye as he really was ; and, although I had seen him before, this was no easy matter, but I succeeded at last. I do not think, my dear Julie, that I have grown very rusty since the time when, in the year IX. of the Republic, I had the good fortune to discover your acquaintance with the makers of the infernal machine, and the still greater good luck to get you out of that scrape.

"I can hear you ask, 'Who is this man ?' Well, do you remember that on Tuesday, before I went to the Messageries, when I first told you about the will that is to give me a dowry for Clarisse, I spoke of an unknown man, whom I had met in the court-yard at

the post-office accompanied by a woman, who asked for the letters addressed to Zenobia Capitaine? You have not forgotten that this man, whom I followed at first, followed me in his turn, and almost caused me to be killed in the garden of the Tuileries? Well, it is with the same fellow that I have been travelling from Paris to Périgueux!

"This is impossible, you will say. Well, it is true. I recognised him by his way of dragging his feet along, a habit which he has contracted in trying to make himself look shorter, when he is too tall for his disguise. I have not a shadow of doubt now but what this is the very man whom I met in the Rue Jean-Jacques-Rousseau.

"The meeting is strange, you will admit it. Cornillon told me that the rascal belonged to the high political police, and was greatly favoured by Fouché. But he could not give me any exact information about him, although I am sure that he knows him. Of course, the journey of a political agent to the South of France would be easy to account for at this juncture; and, indeed, there is nothing to show that he is going to the Dordogne for the sole purpose of meddling with my affairs. Why, however, should he have endeavoured to appropriate the sutler's letters? that is what I cannot understand. It is true that there is a way of accounting for both of these things. If, for instance, Fouché, who cannot be well disposed towards me, has had me watched because I know some State secrets, what then? Since I sent in my resignation I must be an object of suspicion to those who know that I once had the management of the dark room. Thus, it may be that Fouché has sent some one from the 'house' to watch me, without the slightest reference to Lacaussade's money. Still, even that does not explain how they know Zenobia Capitaine's name.

"Then again, did this good-for-nothing spy recognise me, when he first saw me in the coach, as the man whom he had followed from the Palais-Royal to the Tuileries? No, certainly not. And did he recognise me when he had knocked my spectacles off? I think not. It requires keener eyes than these men have now-a-days to find out an old hand like myself, and he cannot have suspected anything. No, he did not know my eyes again, although he knocked off my spectacles; he did not recognise them as those of the old grey-headed trooper whom he had seen at the post-office. Ah! I do not make such mistakes as to wear a wig that does not suit my complexion and eyebrows.

"It is certain that after his attempts at spying at the outset of the journey he kept quiet, and was even very attentive to me. I gave myself out as living in the Marais, upon a little money of my own, and said that I was going to Périgueux on account of a lawsuit. I call myself Bonnin, as in my passport. He swallowed all this very easily. He told me that he was going south to procure horses for the king's guards; and this is not a very cunning invention of his by any means. He also seemed disposed to be polite to me. When

we were near Limoges I was stupid enough to get left behind on one side of a hill, and the coach started off without me. Fortunately, I had the good luck to meet a peasant with a cart. The conductor thought that I was ahead. Monsieur Gardilan, as the spy calls himself, reproached him with his negligence, it seems, and congratulated me upon not being left behind on the road for good. Was he sincere? I cannot tell; at all events, I intend to keep an eye on him in the town where we arrived this morning. We are staying at the same hotel, and I shall be able to see all that he does.

"One person of whom I am absolutely sure is the gentleman from the café. This worthy old dunce deals in truffles, and seems to know this part of the country well. He is talkative, boastful, and indiscreet, and besides, as I have already said, he is very deaf. He is an excellent recruit, and I expect to get more than one useful point from him.

"Now, my dear Julie, I have only to begin work, that is, to start off to find Zenobia; prudently, of course, for there may be danger. I know where to obtain the first information, but to begin with I think it best to make sure that Gardilan has not come here to annoy me. In an affair like this it will not do to leave anything to chance.

"I believe that eight days will suffice to accomplish what I wish to effect, and I need not say that I shall start for Paris as soon as I have the will in my possession. I will let you know everything that may occur until that happy moment, for I have full faith in you, my dear Julie, whatever you may think. The proof of it is that I have left Clarisse under your care.

"As regards the dear child, I can but repeat what I said on the day when I went away. Calm her by allowing her to believe that the young officer will return when I do, and that we have only absented ourselves for the purpose of arranging the marriage that she hopes for.

"As regards outside matters, you know what you have to do; our heir promised me that I should not be disturbed by him, and he will keep his word. But if by any chance any one comes to ask any questions, I have told Bourdache to admit nobody. Watch him to see that he obeys. In case—but that is unlikely—any of the authorities should make inquiries, say that I am on a journey, and that you do not know my business. Moreover, I don't think that anything of that kind will happen. The young man is as much interested as I am in keeping his adventures quiet.

"Before closing this letter, I have only to renew to you all the assurances which I have so often given you, and I promise you that you shall have an income of six thousand francs a-year out of the colonel's money. You must therefore pray for my success.—Yours for life,

"LUC BONNIN.

"P.S.—Above all, not a word to Clarisse."

"MONSIEUR GUILLAUME FRANTZ,
"Cashier at M. Machefer's,
"9 Rue Montmartre, Paris.

"PÉRIGUEUX, 5th August, 1815.

"My dear Lucien,—Frantz, my cashier, will give you this letter, which I do not address to you direct, because I do not trust the postal service.

"I write you this almost on arriving, as I only reached your native city this morning, after a wearying journey and various unexpected incidents. I hasten to add that so far all has gone on well, and that chance seems to favour us.

"You know that I was late in getting my seat, and had to take one in the middle of the coupé. I reached the office at the appointed hour. The travellers were called. Number 1 was Monsieur Gardilan, and Number 2 Monsieur Bonnin. This was my first surprise. You may easily imagine that I took a good look at the so-called Bonnin. I remembered what you told me. It was exact. He was indeed the sham soldier. I recognised him at once, although he now had a white tie and blue spectacles.

"It is idle to say that I was not surprised to find your competitor, or rather your enemy. But I am satisfied with myself, for I did not flinch, and he did not imagine that I had detected the false trooper under the new disguise. He recognised me at once, although he did not appear to do so. Ah! he is a cool hand!

"I knew that his eyes would be on me, and I acted accordingly. I said who I was, and talked about my business, and stated that I was going to Périgueux for some truffles; and, moreover, I did not forget to appear to be deaf. If I had seemed to hear without having everything repeated to me, he would have mistrusted me. But I was no such fool. He thought me deaf at the café, and he thinks me so now. We were the best of friends by the time we reached the third stage.

"This did not prevent me from feeling anxious at his being in the coach. I said to myself: 'We are going to Périgueux after the same game.' But I am not sorry after all. I can watch Bonnin closely, and I have the advantage over him, for he does not dream that I know what he has come here for.

"You are delighted, no doubt, but wait a bit, all is not yet over. In fact, this is only the beginning. The other traveller, number one, who is called Gardilan, is a tall, long-legged fellow, of good appearance, well shaved and dressed. At first sight I did not feel any great liking for him, but I did not suspect him. But I suddenly saw that he was looking closely, and, indeed, with a very strange expression, at the other man. I know that way of looking. Fouché's detectives resort to it. So this made me reflect. Ten minutes later I saw that Bonnin was looking over the tops of his glasses at Gardilan. Being between them I could see it all, and before

night time, I was sure that my two men were watching each other closely.

"I cannot tell you how many tricks they played one another on the way. The younger one did the most of this. Bonnin limited himself to asking Gardilan close questions, while the latter did all he could to be disagreeable to your friend of the Rue d'Enfer. Among other things, he made the conductor believe that the old man had gone ahead when he had really lagged behind. He evidently hoped that he would be left on the way; and this came near being the case, for the coach would not have returned or waited for him. I must admit that I was glad to be delivered from Bonnin, for a time at least, for he is evidently a dangerous foe. But he is also naturally persevering, and found a cart somewhere, which enabled him to overtake us at the second stage.

"You see, my dear friend, that I had plenty of company, and was not at all dull. I had enough to do to study my companions. As for your host from the Rue d'Enfer, we know what he is going to Périgueux for, and I am glad that I met him, for it proves that I acted rightly. Bonnin, like myself, is going after your uncle's will, there can be no doubt of that. I guessed rightly, then, in saying that your sutler-woman had it with her.

"Thus, as regards Bonnin I am sure, but I am not sure as to the other man. He worries me. He says that he is travelling to find horses for the king's guards. That is not a regular business, and then, why does he watch the other man? I cannot suppose, however, that he also is after the colonel's will. Still, why has he come to Périgueux? I saw that he wished to question me by making me talk about the land of truffles and its inhabitants. I also found out that he only did so when we were alone. It is true that Bonnin asked the same questions, and always when the other was not beside us.

"If they could only thwart one another it would simplify my task. I have endeavoured to get into their good graces and to remain so. I play the deaf man very carefully, and make them shout themselves hoarse when they talk to me, which greatly amuses me. But I also pretend to be stupid, and, indeed, I have succeeded in making them believe that I am the most ignorant provision dealer in all France and Navarre. The result of their high opinion of my intellect is that they don't mistrust me, and thus I don't despair of becoming their confidant after a little time, which would be a great advantage to us.

"I say after a little while, because it seems to me that my two new acquaintances mean to remain here for some time. Bonnin states that he has a lawsuit to attend to, and will not leave until it is decided. Gardilan says that there are horses in Périgord that are exactly what he needs for mounting the king's men, and that his purchases will keep him here for two weeks at the least. He also likes the cookery of the place, and shows that he likes it, and I

think that he is very fond of good living. I must try to make him drink as well, and then set him talking. Meantime, I have told them both that I shall be here for some time myself.

"This, my dear Lucien, is how matters now stand. I am staying at the best hotel here, and so are they, and I shall soon find out what the hotel-keeper knows about Zenobia, for he knows everybody for ten miles around. The town is, moreover, full of gay people, who come to this house to feast, and they drink too much to be very careful as to what they say. In twenty-four hours, no doubt, I shall know what I want to know.

"We can be sure now that Bonnin will be working under my very eyes, for I shall contrive to watch him closely. This is an important point, as I know that I shall be as well able as he is to find the sutler-woman, and that she will not hesitate to choose between us if we both happen to court her at once.

"I need not tell you that I shall write frequently and let you know all that occurs. I am satisfied with my beginning. The enemy has arrived at the same time as myself, but I am better armed than he is, and will get the will.

"Bonnin can only show Zenobia his rascally face and his money, whereas I have the medal that you gave me with the cross upon it, made by her own hand. She will recognise it and listen to Timoleon Machefer, whose face, I flatter myself, is a thoroughly honest one, and will inspire her with confidence at once. But don't let me put the cart before the horse. To please the sutler-woman I must find her, and that is why I do not write anything further now. I am going into the kitchen to chat with the landlord, who, I think, is very talkative.

"I presume that you are not dull, for our friends must have called upon you often. Remember me to Thomas, and tell him to be careful. He will know what I mean. I send my respectful compliments to his charming daughter, and I need not ask you to watch over the poor little humpback who did us such good service. Frantz has orders to take care of him, but he is somewhat rough, and I want the boy to be well treated.

"I embrace you with all my heart, my dear friend, and hope to see you again before very long.—Your old comrade,

"TIMOLEON MACHEFER."

XI.

“TO THE BARONESS DE SAINTE-GAUBERGE,
 “16 Rue de la Grange Batelière, Paris.

“PÉRIGUEUX, 9th August, 1815.

“Dear Zoé,—I told you in my first letter that I was going to begin work at once. I have begun, but I have not yet accomplished anything ; in fact, I have burnt my fingers.

“I must tell you how, for it is really amusing. On the day after I arrived, after a good breakfast, washed down with two bottles of Bergerac, which I drank to your good health, I went to the prefect, to whom I sent in my card with the Duke of Otranto’s recommendation. I was made to wait a full hour, and I thought this rather disrespectful to our illustrious patron, but I was finally introduced into the room of the head authority in the great place for truffles.

“He received me coldly. He is a noble, ‘a voltigeur of Louis XIV’, as such men are called by the Liberals, and seemed to feel a sovereign contempt for Fouché, under pretence that he had been a monk and was a regicide. What an idea ! People may well say that these *émigrés* never learn and never forget anything.

“He began by asking me in a dry tone if I had not been in Périgord in 1811. Our patron, unfortunately, put that in his letter ; I foolishly replied that I had, and that I had helped to bring some men who had robbed the State to the scaffold. This was fatal. It seems that among these guerillas there was a near relative of the prefect himself. I ought to have remembered that the government had changed twice since then.

“You may well suppose that what I said was highly displeasing to the prefect, who was already ill-disposed towards the ‘house.’ These old-fashioned royalists are all full of prejudice, and one should not rely upon them to favour a fusion of classes. He drily remarked that Colonel Labédoyère had already been arrested in Paris, that Marshal Ney had been captured in Auvergne, and that he had been informed of this ; so that, as my mission had no longer any object, there was need of his interference.

“This was a formal dismissal, and it was accompanied by a look that showed me to the door. Anybody but Maxime Trimoulac would have gone, but I am a good war-horse. I respectfully observed to the prefect that my mission was more extensive than he thought, and that I had been sent to the south by his excellency the minister of the police of the realm, to study the general spirit of the public and

to watch certain persons ; that I counted upon passing a certain time in the Dordogne, and hoped to obtain all indispensable facilities from the authorities. The prefect, still as stiff as a ramrod, requested me to say exactly what I meant.

"I then did so. As the colonel and the marshal were arrested, I had no excuse, as regards Fouché, for prolonging my stay. This is as much as to say that my official mission was at an end, and that I might as well take advantage at once of a recommendation that I may never obtain again.

"Well, I declared to the head functionary that I was sent to watch and interrogate a certain Zenobia Capitaine, formerly a sutler-woman in the 19th Artillery, who had recently returned from Russia, and was suspected of being an emissary of the Bonapartist conspirators now located in foreign parts. This I made up on the spot, you see.

"The chance strokes are those that tell. Would you believe it, my beauty, on hearing this the prefect assumed a most serious air, looked at a register upon his desk, and solemnly replied : 'My administration has gone ahead of the government. The woman named Zenobia Capitaine was arrested last July, on the 14th, as suspected of being a Bonapartist engaged in propaganda on the usurper's account, and for having used seditious expressions. She is now in the city prison.'

"I had spoken at random, but I had spoken well. This imprisonment of the sutler-woman suited me exactly. I had her at hand without being obliged to run after her. You may imagine that I seized upon the chance. After a delicate compliment as to the vigilance of his administration, I said to the prefect that I requested permission to enter the prison freely, and speak to the prisoner without witnesses. He replied that he would give orders to that effect.

"I then thought of killing two birds with one stone and getting rid of the spectacted party who has been at my heels all the way from Paris. I spoke of him as a dangerous person, who was a revolutionary agent, recognised by me in spite of his disguise, and that he ought to be sent from one police station to another till he again reached Paris, where he would be obliged to face his record. The prefect made a memorandum of this, and told me that he would send the commissary of police to examine this traveller's papers.

"I said to myself that the rascal was now attended to, that he would get frightened, and that they would arrest him and send him back to where he came from. I bowed to the very ground, and returned to the hotel, enchanted with my morning's work. You are delighted too, I'll wager. But wait a little, and see how bad luck stepped in.

"The dinner hour came. We sat down. I sat, of course, between the truffle-seller and the spectacted serpent. Everybody was lively. The deaf man made such mistakes every moment that we

shrieked with laughter. We were eating some crawfish à la Bordelaise, such as you cannot get either at the Rocher or at Véry's, when suddenly the commissary appeared, with his scarf about him, and followed by two gendarmes. There was general astonishment. He asked to see our passports. Every one showed his own; I first, and then the truffle-seller. Both were correct, of course. Then came the white tie, who piteously replied: 'I have none, sir.' 'Then follow me, sir,' said the commissary. Whereupon the white tie left his crawfish, and without a word went off with the gendarmes, who took him away.

"I hear you say, 'That fellow is no credit to "the house." What stupidity!' I thought so, too, but wait a moment. You may imagine the stir occasioned by this arrest. The worthy truffle-seller could not get over it. Nor I, but not for the same reason. I could not understand how it was that an old hand like this man could have neglected the common precaution of a passport.

"Wait a bit, though, and you will see! The next day I rose as lively as a lark, feeling delighted at having got rid of the old spy, and I drank a bottle of white wine to open my appetite. I had not finished it, and was drinking with the trader, for he is really a good fellow, when I received my permit to enter the prison. I did not lose a moment, of course, but set off for the Cours Tourny, where the entrance of the jail is; and the head-keeper, who had been apprised of my coming, received me very politely and said: 'The sutler-woman is walking about the courtyard. You can question her at your ease. I will take you there.' He did so, and what did I see? A dozen male and female prisoners walking about in a great courtyard, and upon the bench there sat the spectacled serpent talking to a woman whom I at once set down as being Zenobia Capitaine herself.

"It was she, indeed, and I then understood why the rascal had no passport. He has come here, like me, after the sutler-woman; that is clear. He had found out by talking with the hotel-keeper that she was in prison, and had purposely got himself sent there. This was well managed, or else I am mistaken. But who would have supposed that the country prisons were so badly arranged that the two sexes are allowed to meet in this way? It is frightful, and I shall let his excellency know about it.

"It is needless to say that I complained to the keeper. He replied that there was so very little room. What an excuse! They should have kept Zenobia Capitaine in a dungeon, and have thrown the spectacled serpent into an underground hole.

"The old rascal did not look at all abashed at sight of me, but came up to me to say that he had written to Paris, and that he should soon be identified and set free. I wished him good luck, and sent for the sutler-woman to the clerk's office.

"You may think that she was easier to fool than the man with the white tie; but you are mistaken. I have unfortunately found

the most cunning sutler-woman in the whole French army. I presented myself at once as being sent by Lieutenant Bellefond, the colonel's heir, and made up a story to account for coming in his place. But it did not succeed. Zenobia did not contradict me, but she solemnly swore that the colonel was drowned in the Beresina, and did not confide any will whatever to her.

"I have been to see her every day for four days, and spent an hour each day with her, but we are no further advanced than we were before. I have laid traps for her in vain, she never varies in her replies. I almost believe that she is telling the truth, and, of course, if there is no will, I inherit by law.

"I do not, however, abandon the hope of making her speak out, and I have written to my uncle's man of business for fresh particulars.

"As soon as I arrive at any result, which will be soon, no doubt, I shall return to your cosy nest in the Rue de la Grange-Batelière. Till then, most charming of baronesses, I sign myself, as ever, your most ardent worshipper,

"MAXIME TRIMOULAC."

"MADAME JULIE BOUTARD,

"93 Rue d'Enfer, Paris.

"PÉRIGUEUX, 17th August, 1815.

"My dear Julie,—I shall greatly surprise you by stating that I have just left the city prison, after being kept there for ten days. That is why I did not write before. Do not be alarmed, however, at hearing that I have been locked up; I need not have gone to prison at all, as I shall presently explain. But, unfortunately, I have more serious news, and no very good tidings of the great affair.

"I was in the company of the truffle-seller and the spy whom I met at the post-office when I last wrote. I told you that I was on my guard with reference to one, and trying to get some information from the other. I did not learn much from the truffle-dealer, however, but the hotel-keeper told me that the sutler-woman who had been with Colonel Lacaussade to Russia had returned in June, and that a report existed that she had the colonel's will with her. He also told me something still more surprising, which was that Zenobia Capitaine had been accused of being a Bonapartist agent by the ultra-royalists here, and had been sent to prison, where she still was.

"This bad news disconcerted me, for it upset all my plans. I could not talk with Zenobia, and had no hope of being allowed to visit her cell. Fortunately, it occurred to me to join her by causing my own arrest. I had made inquiries and learned that the rules of the place were not at all strict, and that the prisoners could communicate with one another. This suited me, and I soon saw that my imprisonment would enable me to talk with the sutler-

woman at my ease. I had only to pretend to be of the same politics, and I could then pass as Lieutenant Bellefond's envoy.

"It now remained for me to find some pretext for being arrested. But although people often go to prison against their will, it is not so easy to go there when you wish to do so. I was in this dilemma when in the middle of our dinner the commissary of police appeared and asked for the passports of the travellers who had arrived the day before. I had an inspiration on the spot. I replied to him that I had none. I was afraid that the commissary might be a good fellow, who would ask me to identify myself otherwise, but he told me at once to go off with the gendarmes. I believe that my dear travelling companion, the man with the bristly moustache, had denounced me. Good spy! Little did he think how well he was playing my game!

"To tell the truth, I did not worry myself in the least, and my imprisonment was not a serious danger. I knew very well that, as I had a regular passport in my trunk, it would be found at last, if looked for, and I intended to say, when asked why I had hidden it, that I had merely wished to see how far the contempt of the authorities for public liberty would go. I had a variety of plans arranged in my own mind which were suited to the part that I intended to play while on my trip to prison. The inquiries about me would last several days. That suited me exactly, and all I wanted was to be able to talk to the sutler-woman.

"Things did not turn out altogether as I wished, however. At first all went well. I was treated politely. The gendarmes saw that I was not a malefactor, and the keeper, when he saw that I had a well-filled purse, became very deferential. He lodged me comfortably, and allowed me to walk about the court. I became acquainted with Zenobia at once, and, as you may imagine, I made every effort to treat with her.

"She is very like what I thought she would be. She is tall, and strong, and ruddy, and did not seem hard to deal with. I went straight to the point, and said that I had come from her friend Lucien Bellefond, who had received her letter, but could not come himself or reply, as he was being greatly annoyed on account of politics. This was at least plausible, especially after my arrest, and Zenobia listened to me attentively, but only made evasive answers, and I saw at once that she was on her guard.

"As to the letter addressed to the lieutenant, she avoided explaining herself, letting me tell its contents, and neither saying that she had written it nor that it did not exist. She spoke as guardedly of the colonel, declaring that he was dead, and that some day his death would be fully proved. She spoke more openly as to her dear Lucien, whom she greatly pitied for being persecuted by the government. But nothing more.

"You may imagine that I said all I could to win her confidence. She asked if the poor boy had changed much since she had seen

him, which was a skilful way of finding out whether I really knew him. I had no difficulty in describing him, and I did so. I spoke of his hasty temper, and she must have realised from that remark that I really knew the dear lieutenant.

"The first day was spent in this fencing, and the second, on which my talk was more skilfully managed, seemed to promise well. I was seated on a bench beside Zenobia, and I endeavoured to entrap her by insidious questions suddenly asked from time to time. I asked her, for instance, when she least expected it, why she had suddenly changed her mind after announcing her arrival to Lucien. I think that she was then about to make some admission, but just then, what should I see but the rascal with the mole on his cheek coming in with the keeper, who seemed to be obeying his orders.

"This fellow must belong to the police, you see, and must have a high position, too, to be admitted into prisons in this way. He came up to me, the vile rascal, and hypocritically consoled with me, and I made suitable replies. He then went away, and Zenobia was sent for to the clerk's office. There can be no doubt upon the point that this man came here on her account. You see how relentlessly bad luck pursues me.

"An hour later Zenobia returned, and I wished to renew negotiations at the point they had been left off. I began speaking of the mission confided to me by Lucien, and I dwelt upon the sacred promise that I had made him to bring his uncle's will back with me. She let me go on for a while, but she presently replied, with the utmost coolness: 'That gentleman who was talking to you just now, and who sent for me, says that he has been sent by Lucien Bellefond, too. Which of you am I to believe?'

"I must admit that I found nothing to say. I had not expected such a trick as that. This rascal, this robber, is playing my game, it appears. He has come here to swindle this woman out of the colonel's will. In whose interest? Can it be to sell it to the lieutenant, or to the heir-at-law? This last supposition is the most likely.

"Be it as it may, I saw at once that my game was blocked, and that I could not obtain anything more from the sutler-woman. I then greatly regretted that I had allowed myself to be put in prison. Once there, no one knows how long he may stay. Besides, I said to myself that Gardilan, who must have a long arm, might advise the authorities to keep me there. Fortunately, I got off after ten days spent in anxiety and weariness. My papers were examined, and I was set free yesterday, after being well lectured for the trick that I had played the commissary by hiding my passport.

"I then returned to the hotel, where I found the worthy truffle-dealer and the man with the bushy moustaches, who made up a ridiculous story to account for his visit to the prison.

"You see, my poor Julie, that after so many careful efforts, all must now be begun again on a new basis. Well, all the same, I do

not despair. My antagonist does not give up either, but he has not succeeded any better than I have, and I have one advantage over him. He must be in doubt as to the very existence of the will, whereas I have a certainty, as I possess Zenobia's letter.

"I have made an important discovery in that respect. This letter was not in her handwriting, for she can neither read nor write. I have positive proof of that; and, if she did not write it, she dictated it. To whom? That is the point. To some one who may have gone to Paris, and taken the will with her. This I shall soon find out. All that I can now tell you, my dear Julie, is that I am on a new track, and this time I believe it to be the right one.

"Quiet Clarisse as well as you can. Yours for life,

"LUC BONNIN."

"MONSIEUR GUILLAUME FRANTZ,

"Cashier at M. Machefer's,

"9 Rue Montmartre, Paris.

"PÉRIGUEUX, 29th August, 1815.

"My dear Lucien,—I have something new to tell you this time, and you will forgive me for remaining so long without writing when you know what I have been doing for the last three weeks. I know that Frantz has shown you the business letters that I have regularly addressed to him ever since I left. You cannot be anxious, therefore, and as I wished to tell you something definite, I have waited till now.

"Yes, I have something to tell, and this is what it is. You will remember that I found myself in the company of two fellows whom I suspected of having come, like myself, on account of the colonel's money. As to one, it was certain, as the man with the white tie was Bonnin. The other one was watching him, that was clear, and I wondered why; I now know, and will tell you. You will be greatly surprised.

"In my first letter I told you that I was trying to get into the good graces of these people, so as to find out what they were up to. I have succeeded beyond my hopes. With Bonnin, my intercourse was stopped by his imprisonment, for I must tell you that the cunning scamp had himself arrested as being without a passport. You will ask why. Well, I see too late that I ought to have begun at the beginning by telling you that our poor Zenobia has been put in prison. This happened shortly before I came here, and she is still in the city jail.

"Monsieur Gardilan, the man with the bushy moustaches, has very advantageous connections, owing to his being in search of horses for the government, and he contrived to visit the jail. But Bonnin had not the same facilities, and he was obliged to let himself be arrested so as to get at the sutler.

"Why was Zenobia imprisoned? you will ask. Because she was

accused of being an agent of Bonaparte, and in this they are all wrong. However, I return to my spies. They were more fortunate than myself, as they saw Zenobia every day, while I was vainly endeavouring to get at her. But Gardilan did not seem to be progressing, for he came back to the hotel every night with a long face, and drank very hard ; no doubt to console himself for his want of success.

"One evening, when he was quite tipsy, a man belonging to this part asked him to take a walk. As they were going out they met your farmer of Château Lévêque, whom I had sent for, and who informed me of something I should not otherwise have known. The man who had gone out with Gardilan was your uncle's business man ; and Gardilan is really your uncle's heir-at-law and nephew—Monsieur Maxime Trimoulac.

"Yes, my dear boy, he is your rival himself. You now know what this scamp has come here for. I see it very plainly ; but one thing puzzles me. I cannot understand how a nephew of Monsieur Lacaussade can be in the police force. However, your farmer tells me that this good-for-nothing fellow left his home and family after disgracing himself, and that he is supposed to have deserted from the army, and to have sold himself in the time of the Duke of Rovigo's sway. So it is not surprising that he should now be in the Duke of Otranto's pay.

"Be that as it may, I know his secret, whereas he does not know mine, as his man had never seen me with your farmer, and I have thus a great advantage over him. I took this into account in becoming more and more intimate with the rascal. He did not mistrust me, for he thought me deaf and stupid. At last, by dint of paying for his champagne, I so gained his confidence that he asked me last week to go with him to the prison.

"I must tell you that Bonnin was set free after ten days' confinement ; and, to his great regret, to judge from his face, he did not advance matters by being put in prison. Meanwhile, too, the so-called Gardilan had gone every day to visit Zenobia Capitaine, who still held out against him.

"You may imagine that I was sincerely glad when this proposition to visit the prison was made to me by my most dangerous antagonist. There is a providence ; I'm sure of it.

"Trimoulac, persuaded that I believed him to be Gardilan, told me, so as to induce me to go with him, that he had a service to ask of me. I leave you to imagine how much coaxing I needed. Well, we started for the prison together, and on the road he told me that he had a great interest in finding out whether a certain person had received a will from an officer, who had died during the retreat from Russia. He added that, unluckily, she did not fancy him, and that I might, perhaps, be more fortunate than he. I have such a good face, he said. I replied that I would do my best, although my deafness was a great drawback, and I added that the woman ought not to see

me with him. He understood that, so he merely introduced me to the keeper, and then went away. This is how I have succeeded in conversing for an hour every day with Zenobia Capitaine.

"But I am abusing of your patience, and I will not do so any longer. I have seen the good sutler-woman, and have learned from her own lips that she brought the colonel's will with her. He died at Smolensk, on the 5th of December, 1812. She declares that it will be easy to have proof of this by writing to the director of the hospital there, and she adds that he made you his sole heir.

"This is news, or I'm mistaken. Ah! I had trouble enough to get hold of it. At the two first interviews I only obtained obstinate denials. At the first, I did not have your medal with me; on the second occasion, I was not sure that we were not being watched, and dared not show it. The third time I made a firm attempt. I began by telling her the real situation of affairs, and how and why I had come; the attempts of the man with the gold spectacles as regards you; the purpose of Trimoulac, the heir-at-law; the proposal which he had made to me, and my pretence of accepting it. Then I showed her the medal, and pointed out the cross that she had made upon it fifteen years previously. This was decisive, and Zenobia then told me all.

"I shall tell you myself exactly what she said, for I shall start to-morrow for Paris. In the meanwhile, this is briefly how things stand: Zenobia had the will, but she has not got it now. When she reached Périgueux last June, knowing that you must be in Paris, but being ignorant of your address, she wrote to you on a mere chance, with the hope that you would receive her letter through the War Office. How did it miss you? I cannot imagine; but I keenly suspect that it fell into Bonnin's hands, and this would explain his visits to the post-office. The day after she wrote she received a letter from you. Do not be alarmed, however. The signature was false, and everything leads me to believe that the note was written by Trimoulac, whom an agent had no doubt informed of the sutler-woman's arrival, and of the rumours as to the existence of a will to your advantage.

"You understand why I think so, do you not? A false address was given to Zenobia as yours, and she was advised to set out at once for Paris, where she would be expected at the address given.

"Now, I must tell you that Zenobia is quite illiterate. When I said just now that she had written to you, I should have said that she had had a letter written to you. By whom? By the person who undertook to read the forged letter to her. This person, who is a woman of this place, a young peasant woman who knew you, so she said, when a boy, and who is Zenobia's niece, immediately set out for Paris with the will. How is it that you have never heard anything of her? She evidently went to the false address, which Zenobia, unfortunately, could not remember; but what became of the young woman afterwards? Neither her aunt nor I can tell

that, and that is what I wish to find out as soon as I return to Paris.

"I told Gardilan that the prisoner had refused to tell me anything, and I think that he is now tired out, and will return to Paris. I believe also that your friend of the Rue d'Enfer will do the same.

"However, I do not care for either of them now. I know that the will is in the hands of a woman whose name I have, with a description of her person. We must now find her, and we shall soon do so, I promise you.

"Remember me to all, and do not forget your old friend,

"TIMOLEON MACHEFER.

"*P.S.*—When you are a millionaire, we must obtain Zenobia Capitaine's release, and I hope that we shall be able to do so, and then I will take her into my shop to sell retail goods."

XII.

WHILE Timoleon Machefer was thus running after luck in Périgord, Lucien Bellefond was leading the quietest life imaginable in the Rue du Jour, and he had never been so happy, for Thérèse loved him, and M. Vernède had forgiven him.

The banker had even been kinder than Lucien had hoped, for he had listened without a frown to the story of his misfortunes at the gaming-table, and had not uttered a single reproach. He complimented him upon his duel with the Prussian, while Thérèse blamed him for thus risking his life without regard for the anxiety of his friends. She blamed him also for trusting a stranger, and for not insisting sooner upon leaving the house in the Rue d'Enfer, where he had been kept a prisoner.

It seemed as though she had guessed that there was a woman there, although Lucien had carefully concealed from her the fact of Mademoiselle Clarisse's existence. However, she forgave everything, and was so happy in the presence of the lover whom she had mourned as dead, and whom she now saw every day, and talked with as to the future, that she forgot the past, and it all seemed like a dream to her.

The plan devised by Machefer was strictly conformed to. Lucien lived alone in his lodging on the second-floor, where no one came excepting the old servant, Frantz, and the little humpback, who was doing wonders in the shop, and showed the greatest devotion to his patron.

Every day, after the closing of the bank, M. Vernède came with his daughter and spent the evening with the convalescent. He was gentler and kinder than ever before, as though misfortune had made him more affectionate. Not only did he make no objection to the future marriage of the young lovers, but he associated himself with their hopes, and advised them as to their married life. However, when Lucien spoke of their commercial partnership, and of the large payment to be made on the 11th of September, he turned the conversation to other subjects, and replied evasively to the officer's questions.

He even seemed desirous of screening him from the financial troubles that threatened the bank, as though he no longer took into any account the promise which he had made of making him a partner. Lucien at first proposed to sell his farm in Périgord, as he had intended doing before he had taken it into his head to gamble. M. Vernède, however, firmly refused to allow this, and said a great

deal about the advantages of owning a piece of land, however small it might be, if it would but keep those who lived upon it, and serve as a refuge in misfortune.

He would not have spoken thus if he had not foreseen his own failure, and Lucien was struck by his persistence in looking forward to an inevitable catastrophe. The young man vainly reminded his friend that Machefer had gone to bring back a fortune, that his first letter promised success, and that all would be well if Lacaussade's will was in his favour.

M. Vernède was not led away, however, by these earnest assurances ; he shook his head without replying, or muttered a few words as to the necessity of taking precautions against possible reverses, and as to the prudence of anticipating the worst. This tendency to despair of everything was soon so evident, that Lucien finally gave up all attempt to make him take a more cheerful view of matters, and only thought of his own pleasure in seeing Thérèse every evening.

Time passed on, and even the arguments which he had made use of to comfort the banker failed him, for Machefer had ceased to write. "No news is good news," says the proverb, which, like all proverbs, is uncertain. And it was not applicable in this case ; for, if the provision merchant had found Zenobia, he would surely have made it known at once.

Lucien realised this, and said nothing. He bitterly deplored the fact that his uncle's fortune did not prevent the failure of Thérèse's father ; but he was almost consoled for his own part, and looked forward with pleasure to a quiet life with Thérèse on his little farm of Château Lévêque.

The entire month of August passed by, and the lovers were happy in each other's society, while the banker remained sad, resigned, uncomplaining. It was evident that this resolute man wished to keep his grief and anxiety to himself, in order not to interfere with his daughter's happiness.

Twice, however, after Timoleon's departure, Vernède had departed from his habitual reserve. The first time, which was soon after the purveyor had left, he broke out fiercely against the men of the old system. Lucien, who was somewhat surprised by this, took the liberty of questioning him, and found that his indignation arose from a visit paid him by a certain Countess des Orgeries, the aunt of the Marquis de Baffey.

This old lady had taken upon herself to come into his office, like a whirlwind in petticoats, and bluntly propose for the banker's daughter on the marquis's behalf. She had done this with the utmost coolness, and without any preamble whatever. Vernède had received her very coldly, but he had not succeeded in preventing her from saying a great deal about *mésalliances*, the honour her nephew was doing him by proposing to marry a woman destitute of rank, and the immense fortune which she meant to leave him, all

this being accompanied by the most astounding remarks about Voltaire, the Count de Provence, and Jean Jacques Rousseau.

He had finally succeeded in telling the feather-brained dame that he declined the alliance, and he had got rid of her ; but he had not recovered his calmness when he saw Lucien in the evening, and he made use of some very strong expressions of displeasure.

The lieutenant's feelings were not the same, however. He had been angry at first at the thought that a rival was attempting to win Thérèse from him, but a look at the gay young girl, when she heard her father's story, reassured him as to the impression made by the marquis's offer. He then remembered that Vernède owed that gentleman three hundred thousand francs, which were payable on the 11th of September, and he felt the deepest admiration for the man who did not hesitate to sacrifice his honour for the happiness of his daughter and his own political opinions.

It would seem that the countess did not return, for nothing more was said about her or her noble nephew ; but one night Vernède came to Lucien's lodgings with an anxious face. He again began to say bitter things about the nobility, and the government that had brought them back, but the beginning of his conversation was different from what it had been before, for he informed Lucien that rigorous measures of great severity were being taken against all who aspired to liberty, and that the officers of the old army were again under suspicion, while all secret societies were being ferreted out with unusual determination.

To the young officer's great surprise, he even mentioned some of the Freemasons as having been pointed out to the police, and proscribed with the utmost severity. He added that he had reason to think that his friend Timoleon might be compromised by his acquaintance with them, and that there was everything to be feared for him, for the " White Terror," as it was called in those days, was rampant, in the south especially.

Three weeks indeed had passed, and there was still no letter from Machefer. This was alarming. Vernède thought, too, that the house in the Rue du Jour would soon be watched, and that it would be best to leave it. Lucien, who had now recovered, was quite able to go out, and if he had not done so it was simply because Machefer had recommended to him to be prudent.

When the banker advised him to go away, and even to leave Paris and lodge in some lonely suburb, he hesitated about taking this course, which would, of course, prevent him from receiving the visits of Thérèse ; but, as soon as he knew that Vernède and his daughter would see him again as soon as it would be prudent to do so, he consented to search for a lodging beyond the city walls.

The plan was unanimously approved of, and on the following day Lucien began his search. If he found a suitable lodging in the course of the day, he did not intend to return to the Rue du Jour, he meant simply to send his new address to Vernède, who would take

charge of all letters that might come for him under cover to Frantz, the cashier.

Thus, on the following day, Lucien went away at an early hour, not without bidding farewell to the worthy Frantz and little *Æsop*. Everybody was already astir in the busy neighbourhood when he went out into the street ; but no one remarked him. His intention was to leave Paris quickly by the nearest barrier, for he had no special suburb in his mind.

He was not going into the country for the country's sake, and cared very little where he pitched his tent. The woods of Ville d'Avray or the meadows of Vertus were all one to him. Besides, he had been fighting from 1813 to 1814, and had little acquaintance with the environs of Paris ; so that now he was obliged to trust to chance in looking for fresh lodgings. However, a very natural feeling drew him towards the north of the city. This was the part he had visited most often during the past year. Machefer had often taken him to the Moulin de la Galette to taste the Argenteuil wine or to eat some fried fish on the isle of Saint-Ouen.

He went along the Rue Montmartre, and still keeping to the right, he soon reached the Barrière Rochechouart, which he passed through.

As soon as he had left the walls behind him he saw the Butte Montmartre, and the sight of the arid height recalled remembrances that had of late almost faded from his mind.

He had gone but once into the caverns of Montmartre, but the circumstances had been so dramatic that he soon recalled every detail of the scene. It was under that mass of plaster that the Grand Mason had administered justice in so relentless a manner, and the mournful traces of the pitiless sectarians must still be visible.

Thus cogitating, Lucien took it into his head to look at the southern side of Montmartre to see whether he could find the opening to the quarry. He followed the street on the left, and finally came to the esplanade where he had sat one Sunday night with Timoleon Machefer, soon after the traitor had been walled up. The spot was lonely. There were only a few boys playing about and chasing one another through the open ground, and Lucien crossed the esplanade and kept near the hill without being noticed.

Broad daylight changes the aspect of places seen by night, and the young ex-mason, who had not been there since the thrilling events of the 2nd of July, could scarcely recognise the crevice in which he had hidden on that memorable occasion. He finally distinguished it by its sinuosities and the thick growth of the brambles at the entrance.

This was the narrow aperture by which the brethren had slipped in, bearing the condemned man tied up in a sack, and this was where he, Lucien Bellefond, had been driven out when he had rebelled against the hasty execution.

He naturally paused to look at this harmless-looking passage, which led into the frightful catacombs, and he had a strong desire to

enter the vault again, and look at the freshly-plastered pillar in which the traitor had found a tomb. But he fortunately remembered that he had no means of exploring the dark vaults, which it was dangerous even to enter with a torch, and made up his mind to go on.

However, at the first step he now took, he found himself face to face with a man, who suddenly rose up before him above a tuft of weeds, as though he had come from the bowels of the earth. This strange personage drew back at sight of Lucien; and then, undoubtedly remembering that it was too late to conceal himself, he left the crevice with a light leap and went off, turning his back on Lucien.

The latter was startled at first to see an unknown man come from a spot which he had supposed to be unknown to all but the masons themselves; but he remembered that it would be important for them and for him to know who had found out their secret. So he began to follow the stranger quietly, keeping him well in sight.

He had not had time to see him distinctly, and could not tell whether he was young or old. His gait and attire did not reveal anything, and he took good care not to turn round.

Lucien thought for a moment of trying to pass him in order to have a good look at him, but he reflected that this would attract the fellow's attention, and that it would be better to follow him until he had a chance of seeing his face.

Meantime, he thought over the matter, and indulged in various conjectures. There were but three reasonable suppositions. Either the man was a resident in the neighbourhood, whom curiosity or idleness had led into the opening without knowing that it conducted to the vast quarries within the height, and who, finding it so narrow and dark, had turned back, vowing never to be caught there again; or he was a spy sent to discover the den where the masons met; or simply a mason who had some reason for going there.

Lucien was inclined to believe him to be a spy. What Vernède had said as to the dangers threatening the secret societies led him to think so. At all events, it would be as well to find out, and Lucien therefore began to follow the man with determination.

This individual had at once turned towards the east and was going quickly along the narrow streets, where there were but few houses, and which conducted to the hamlet of Clignancourt. He presently came towards a wider and better-paved thoroughfare, which is now one of the most frequented streets of a crowded district of Paris, but which then was only the beginning of a royal road.

The man crossed it, and then, turning to the right, he quickly strode along towards a gate, which he opened and closed behind him. This gate stood in front of a small house rising up between court and garden, one of the few which stood apart from one another at intervals along the almost deserted road.

Lucien saw the man turn the corner of the house, which was built of brick, and he stopped short, for he felt greatly perplexed. It seemed easy enough to follow the man, as he had not closed the gate

with a key. But how would he be received in the isolated house, which, in spite of its neat appearance, might be some dangerous lair?

The man's neglect to close the gate behind him seemed an invitation to the imprudent to venture in. While Lucien was thus wisely reflecting, he went slowly towards the gate, and stopping in the middle of the road, began to examine the house attentively.

There were a door and two windows on the ground floor, and three windows on the first and only floor above. All the shutters, which seemed very heavy, were tightly closed. The place appeared to be an unoccupied house, but not a deserted one, for it was in good condition, and the court-yard was carefully kept. The garden behind was closed in by walls, and seemed to be attended to with care. Still, there was nothing to show that any living creature dwelt there, although a man had entered the place.

Lucien did not care to find out what it all meant by entering the house, but before going away he wished to know exactly where he was, so as to find the house again in case of need. He looked around him, and saw that he was on the *Chaussée de Clignancourt*.

He read this name upon a yellow sign, half-effaced by the rain, and suddenly it reminded him of the man walled up in the quarry. He remembered distinctly that his executioners had seized him, gagged him, and put him in the sack at No. 13 in that very street.

At this very moment, too, he caught sight of this number in black letters upon two posts at each side of the gate. Lucien's surprise was now extreme, and numerous thoughts rushed into his brain at once.

A man coming from the quarries, and going straightways to this house, where the unworthy Chevalier de Loupiac had been captured two months before by the "Companions of the Trowel"—it seemed incredible! With a little imagination Lucien might have fancied that the condemned man had escaped from his tomb, and come out to denounce his executioners.

He did not go as far as that in these conjectures, however, but he indulged in others, and not the least unlikely of these was the supposition that some friend of the dead man had ascertained the circumstances of his death, and was trying to investigate it, discover his murderers, and punish them.

Be that as it might, the strange encounter ought certainly to be reported to Vernède. Two days before, Lucien would not have ventured to speak of it to him, for he was not then aware that Machefer had confided the existence of the society to the banker. But, since Thérèse's father had told him of his anxiety with regard to the association, he thought that he was called upon to tell him all that related to it.

He decided, therefore, that he would slightly change his plans, and go that night to Vernède's house to inform him of this occurrence which he could not communicate in any other way. However, as he did not wish to waste the day, he made up his mind to follow

this road, which must end on the plain of Saint-Denis, and to look for a room in the first distant inn he found.

It was time for him to go off, for by remaining in front of the mysterious little house he would learn nothing whatever. The man had seen that he was being followed, and would not be so stupid as to reappear. And Lucien himself was in danger of being examined carefully, for there was nothing to show that the man from the quarry was not hiding behind the shutters and watching him.

Lucien turned aside at last, and walked rapidly away from the quiet house. Beyond it there were no houses save those of some kitchen-gardeners ; and here and there a tavern, with a sign representing a pot of beer with the liquid flowing forth to replenish a goblet held by a grenadier, who is painted life-size in distemper.

The arbours of these drinking-shops had no one beneath their shade at that moment. It was neither Sunday nor Monday, and the working-people were toiling. It was very warm, and there seemed no reason for visiting a quarter where so little shade was found.

Lucien went on with his head down, and walking slowly, for he was in no hurry to engage his lodging outside of Paris, and the meeting with the stranger had made him thoughtful. He wondered what would be the result of it, and how he should manage to present himself at Vernède's house, for it had been agreed that he should not go there until Machefer's return.

Would it not be better to wait and to tell all to his old comrade, without frightening Thérèse's father with his perhaps idle fears, when he had such troubles of his own already ? That might be the best course ; and yet who could say when the purveyor would return from his hazardous trip to Périgord ?

Lucien finally reverted to his first idea of going that night to the Rue des Bourdonnais. By taking a few precautions he thought that he could go there unnoticed, and in order to make sure that he had not been followed, he turned several times as he went up the road. There was no one to be seen, for the whole length of the highway was visible, and nothing had stirred in the little lonely house. Having made sure of this, the young fellow walked on faster, so as to get out of the hot open space as rapidly as possible. He saw that far ahead there were some houses belonging to one of the wretched hamlets which then disfigured the approaches to the great city—some squalid buildings which cropped up at the dusty wayside.

This ugly hamlet was apparently full of laundries, for linen of all kinds was displayed behind the houses. Lucien could not fancy any Parisians living in such an abominable conglomeration of tumble-down hovels ; but then he had determined to lodge in some house where he was sure that no one would be inclined to look for him. He therefore went on, making up his mind to inquire about the locality of some sun-burned peasants whom he saw prowling about beyond the outspread bed-linen.

But at that moment a distant sound made him turn round. It

was a dull, regular tramp, like that of the tide coming in and swelling rapidly. Soon Lucien heard the steps of horses, and it became evident that there was a troop of galloping cavalry near at hand. The first thought that occurred to our young friend was that they were in pursuit of him. He was even about to leave the road, but he restrained himself, for he remembered that a whole squad is never sent after one man, and the police do not proceed so openly.

He soon had proof that it was not he who was being chased, for on turning round he saw at the end of the road that merely a few cavalry soldiers were coming along ahead of a carriage which was rolling rapidly. The men's helmets glittered in the sun, and sparks flew from the pavement.

There was but one man in Paris whose escort could be so showy, and whose equipage could dash along so fast, and that was Louis XVIII. Lucien had often heard of the mad rush which took place every day when the gouty sovereign drove through the streets, and he at once realised that it was the king who was about to pass. Accordingly he stood back to avoid being run over, for he knew that the royal carriage did not turn aside for any one, but ever went ahead with marvellous rapidity.

This was one of the slightest eccentricities of a man who, as a monarch, was sagacious and of moderate views. It was certainly a strange way of enjoying a drive. However, King Louis XVIII.'s gouty legs condemned him to perpetual immobility, and he longed to go through the streets with this mad haste, so as to indulge in some form of rapid motion, as all other was forbidden him by his infirmities.

After the council had met, the king as a rule climbed into a huge open landau, and started off with a few of his horse-guards. The postillions had orders to ride on as fast as they could, and the unfortunate guardsmen often had great trouble in keeping up with them. There was not a day without a downfall, and some rider was often badly injured.

However, this trifling drawback did not prevent his majesty from continuing his three hours' drive, or choosing the worst roads, those which were badly paved, and which were unattractive—such, for instance, as the highways of Saint-Ouen and Choisy. The appointed distance having been covered, the monarch would return to the Tuileries without allowing man or beast to breathe for an instant.

On that day Louis XVIII. had changed his usual route, but not his usual pace.

Lucien had scarcely caught sight of the escort before they reached that point of the road where he had stopped. The landau came along, and Lucien could spy the calm face of the Bourbon king in the midst of a cloud of dust. The greater part of the escort followed at the same time, no one noticing him.

However, the officer in command, whose horse was either tired

or restive, had remained somewhat in the rear, and when he passed in front of the young ex-lieutenant, the latter immediately recognised him.

It was the Marquis de Baffey.

Lucien had not seen his rival since the day when they had met at Vernède's office. But the features of the marquis had remained fixed in his memory. Hate does not forget, and that of the lieutenant had not died away.

He remembered every detail of their meeting, and would have recognised the proud nobleman's cold and haughty face anywhere.

M. de Baffey's memory was probably as faithful, but as he went by he did not look at the lieutenant, who had stood back to see him pass. He was endeavouring at the moment to master his horse, a superb thoroughbred bay, evidently of English origin.

This animal was as restless as it was powerful, and its rider had great trouble in managing it.

He had been delayed by his contest with the animal, and was now trying to get back to his proper place on the right of the escort, which had kept up beside the royal landau. The English horse, which had been violently curbed after a stout contest, was still defending itself by the most unexpected bounding and jibbing, and it required a great deal of skill on the part of the rider to enable him to keep his seat.

However, the officer of the Black Musketeers was not to be shaken off, and as he passed by, firm in his stirrups, with his figure erect, his head high, and his sword at his side, he looked so superb that Lucien could not help admiring, or rather envying him; for, between rivals, admiration is almost the same as envy.

The marquis, firmly grasping the reins, and controlling his horse to perfection, now urged it forward by a vigorous pressure of his thighs, wishing to cover the distance which lay between him and the equipage, and he would soon have done so if, unfortunately, the horse had not suddenly slipped and fallen.

The shock was terrible.

M. de Baffey was unseated and thrown forward with terrible violence; he fell head foremost on the ground, where he lay quite motionless. The horse tried to rise, but fell again—one of its legs was broken.

Meantime, the carriage was still rolling along rapidly, and not a soldier in the escort had returned to pick up the officer.

Whoever fell during the royal drives was very badly off. The carriage horses still galloped on, and would have done the same, indeed, if every man in the escort had been thrown.

That day the equipage rapidly disappeared behind the first houses of the hamlet which closed in the landscape, and Lucien found himself alone with M. de Baffey, who lay unconscious in the middle of the road.

It may be that when he saw his rival fall his first impulse was one

of satisfaction rather than pity. Love is cruel. But he soon returned to better feelings, and running up to the unfortunate marquis, he found him to be in a pitiable condition.

His helmet had rolled off, and blood was flowing from a wound upon his forehead. He gave no sign of life, and Lucien was at first inclined to believe that he had been killed by his fall.

However, when he bent over him he saw that he still breathed, so he tried to help him as well as he could. He knelt down, unbuttoned the marquis's uniform, and then with his handkerchief stanching the blood that flowed from his wound. M. de Baffey murmured a few unintelligible words, but that was all.

Lucien saw that he was fainting, and tried to raise him up as well as he could; but he was beginning to feel puzzled as to what he had better do. What help could he give the injured man? He could not remain there till some one happened to pass, and he could not carry him even as far as the nearest house without assistance.

He had every reason to avoid compromising himself, and he realised that it would be folly to mix himself up in a mishap which had befallen one of the king's guardsmen, and in which the officer might lose his life.

However, he could not make up his mind to leave him in the road, where he might expire if he were not helped. And thus he was in a state of great perplexity when he heard a man calling out to him: "I am coming to help you, sir."

Indeed, soon afterwards a person ran up to him in great haste.

Lucien turned and saw that the stranger was a well-dressed man, with a somewhat military bearing, and jet black moustaches, very carefully waxed.

The new-comer's face awoke a confused recollection in the ex-lieutenant's mind, but he did not dwell upon it, and simply thanked him for coming.

"That is very natural," replied the stranger, "I was walking behind you, and saw this brave officer fall."

At this Lucien could not help feeling some surprise. Ten seconds before the escort had passed by, he had looked towards the city and had not seen any one near by. The man lied, and if he had seen the accident at all, he must have witnessed it from some window near by.

The thought that he had seen it from No. 13 passed through the lieutenant's mind, but what reason had he to think that? It would have been imprudent on the part of an individual attempting to conceal himself after coming out from the quarry, to leave his hiding-place for the sake of talking to the man who had followed him a few moments before.

Besides, his dress was not the same as that of the man whom Lucien had seen before, and he could scarcely have changed his attire. Accordingly, the young ex-lieutenant kept his thoughts to himself, and replied: "This man ought to be taken at once to some place where he might be attended to by a physician."

"Yes, certainly, to his own house, if possible."

"Unfortunately, I do not know where he lives."

"Wait, sir, wait! Here is a pretty pocket-book, in which we shall find out what we want to know, I fancy."

With these words he picked up a little memorandum book which had fallen from the officer's pocket, and which Lucien had not noticed.

"Here is a card," said the new-comer, and he read the inscription upon it aloud:

"THE MARQUIS HENRI DE BAFFEY,
"19 Rue de Varennes."

Lucien knew the name well enough already, and he decided to remember the address.

"Dear me! that is a great way off," added the stranger, "and we could not take the gentleman there."

"While you watch over him, I can go and fetch a coach," said Lucien, who would have been glad to get away.

"Here is one that heaven has sent us," retorted the stranger, at that moment catching sight of a coach that was coming from the village.

"It may be occupied," suggested Lucien, "and it would be better to——"

"No matter. Those who may be inside won't refuse to let a wounded man get in; but we need not worry about that point, as I can see already that the vehicle is empty."

Lucien made no further objection. He would have been glad to go, but he was afraid that an abrupt departure might seem strange, and so he waited.

The coach was indeed empty, and the driver stopped as soon as he was called to.

"Get down," shouted the stranger, "and help us to put this officer into your coach."

"An officer—a wounded officer?" replied the driver. "Oh no, indeed! I'm not such a fool."

"What do you say, you rascal?"

"I say that I know to my cost what it is to carry people about when they have been fighting duels. Eight days' imprisonment and my coach in the pound. That is what I got only recently for doing an act of kindness."

"There hasn't been any duel, you fool!" retorted the stranger. "Don't you see that this officer has been hurt by a fall from his horse? Come, you must take him home, and you shall be well paid for it."

The driver seemed to hesitate for an instant, but he made up his mind to obey. When he alighted from his seat, Lucien, who had listened rather absently, began to look at him. He was a red-faced fellow, with a sodden expression, wearing a coat adorned with multitudinous capes.

After a moment Lucien recognised him. It was the driver of the coach in which he had fought the Prussian officer.

This was certainly unlucky, but it did not seem likely that anything unpleasant would result from the encounter, as the driver did not seem to know Lucien again. It would have been strange if he had, as he had barely seen his face that dark night on the Place Louis XV.

However, Major von Gruner's whilom antagonist did not care to prolong the interview with this dangerous witness of his duel.

"I will help you to put the wounded man into the carriage," said he to the stranger, "and I trust that you will undertake to go home with him."

"Alone ! that is impossible, my dear sir !" exclaimed the man who had come up so opportunely. "This officer may be dying, and I do not wish him to expire in my arms. Now-a-days, such a thing might be turned against one. If an officer of the king's escort died a violent death while alone with me, that would be enough to make matters unpleasant for me, and I must have you as a witness of what really occurred."

"My testimony would do no good," stammered Lucien.

"Excuse me, it would do a great deal of good," replied the unknown, emphatically. "And I must add that you have the first right to speak in the matter, for it was you who first helped this gentleman after his fall. He belongs to you, and heaven forbid that I should dispute him with you ! If you refuse to go with me I shall refuse to go at all, and I shall confide to you the task and honour of saving this gentleman."

Lucien's perplexity was very great. Whatever might be his dislike for M. de Baffey, he was unwilling to desert him, and he realised that if this very suspicious stranger saw him go off he would follow him again.

By accompanying him, on the contrary, to the Rue de Varennes, he would perhaps obtain some enlightenment about him, and he made up his mind to slip away from him as soon as they had taken the marquis home.

"True," he now replied aloud, "it will be better for two of us to watch over this gentleman. I have some urgent business to attend to, but I will put it off till to-morrow."

"I also have business in this neighbourhood," said the stranger, with a shrug of the shoulders ; "but humanity above all things. Come, help us," he added, calling out to the driver, who was looking on sulkily.

They all helped, and the marquis was soon laid upon the cushions of the coach, after which the maimed horse was dragged to the side of the road, and left there.

Lucien and the obliging but mysterious stranger then got in beside the injured man, and started for the Rue de Varennes.

The trip was a silent one at first, for the two men were watching one another. However, after some ten minutes or so, M. de Baffey opened his eyes and said to Lucien, whom he recognised :

"Thanks, sir. I should not have expected anything else from such an enemy as you are, and I shall not forget that you have helped me."

Then, exhausted by the effort, he again fainted away upon the knees of his rival, who was greatly affected.

"You did not tell me that you knew him," said the gentleman with the black moustaches, in a malicious tone.

"I! You are mistaken, sir. I never saw him before," replied Lucien immediately.

"That is strange!" was the retort. "I thought that he was complimenting you upon having helped him, although you were his enemy. Enemies are usually acquainted with one another at the least."

"He must be delirious," replied Lucien; "people always are when there is concussion of the brain."

"Yes, it may be delirium," retorted the stranger in the tone of a man who still has his doubts.

He then said no more, and as Lucien was not disposed to talk, the rest of the ride passed by in silence.

Meanwhile the injured man did not appear to grow either better or worse, and the coach finally stopped outside a very handsome house in the Rue de Varennes at the moment when the carriage-way was being opened to let out a cumbrous-looking vehicle, drawn by two fine horses.

A footman, who was about to climb up behind this carriage, darted forward to drive off the shabby vehicle that dared to bar the way of so elegant an equipage.

However, the stranger quickly popped out his head and said to the lackey: "We are bringing your master, who has been seriously hurt."

At this announcement, which was made in a clear and distinct tone of voice, a woman was heard to utter a cry, and then the carriage drew back to let the hired conveyance enter the court-yard.

At the moment when Lucien alighted on one side, the stranger doing the same on the other, he found himself face to face with an old lady with powdered hair, who was attired in the style prevalent during the latter part of the reign of Louis XV. He had never seen her, but he easily guessed who she was. This dowager, dressed in brocaded silk, was evidently the marquis's aunt, the frivolous old fool who had acted so eccentrically at Vernède's office.

It was indeed the Countess des Orgeries who was settling her hoops, shaking her complicated head-dress, and raising her hands to heaven.

"My nephew! let me see my nephew!" she screamed.

Then, when she saw the marquis lying upon one of the seats of the coach as pale as death and covered with blood, she immediately began to launch forth imprecations, in which she mingled the Liberals, the Count de Provence, and Fouché, the regicide.

In the excess of her despair the good lady was quite unable to understand the accident that had befallen her nephew, and she did not think of asking those about her how it had happened.

The servants had all come out, and in the twinkling of an eye the marquis was carried to his room, for he lived in his aunt's house.

The driver of the coach remained unnoticed, and he at once drove out of the yard, while Lucien followed with the stranger. They were not even thanked for their kindness. The door-keeper closed the heavy gates of the carriage entrance, and that was all.

"Such is the gratitude of noblemen," said the man with the waxed moustaches, in a half-mocking, half-serious tone. "And now, my dear sir," added he, "where shall I take you?"

"Nowhere, thank you. I live near by, and I can go on foot. Let me pay for the coach and leave it to you."

"Oh, no! I cannot allow that. You live near by, do you? All the more reason for leaving you at your own door."

As the stranger spoke he looked Lucien straight in the face, and Thérèse's lover felt that he was caught. It was evident that this man was determined to know where he lived. He could not get rid of him upon any false pretext whatever, and opposition would merely make him more determined.

Lucien thought for a moment of going to the door of some house or other and pretending that he resided there; however, it did not appear probable that this stratagem would deceive the stranger. He would have watched him till he saw him come out again.

At this moment Lucien had an idea. "As you are so kind, sir," said he, "I will go to the Rue Montmartre, at the corner of the Rue du Jour; I have some one to call upon there, and if that suits you we will share the expense of the vehicle together."

"With the greatest pleasure, my dear sir," exclaimed the stranger.

Lucien meanwhile was saying to himself: "I will only stay at Machefer's long enough to throw this fellow off the track. At dusk I will slip out and go to Monsieur Vernède's and tell him what has happened to-day. He will advise me as to what I had better do. At all events, I shall not sleep at home, and if they come to arrest me to-morrow, they won't find any one."

Little was said on the way, for the stranger seemed to be thoughtful; and Lucien on his side was not inclined to speak.

Just as the coach conveying them stopped at the corner of the Rue du Jour, another coach turned the corner, and stopped in front of the first door on the left. At the same moment a man alighted with a valise in his hand; and the stranger in his turn got out.

"What! is it you?" they both exclaimed at one and the same time.

Lucien, who had not yet alighted, saw what was going on, but did not understand it. He hastily jumped down, and then his astonishment was unbounded. For the person who had come from the other coach, and who had exclaimed, "Is it you?" was none other than Timoleon Machefer.

And it was still more astonishing to see Machefer fervently embrace the individual with the waxed moustaches.

How had the two men become acquainted? Lucien had scarcely time to ask himself this question, for the person who had helped him to remove Monsieur de Baffey said:

"Excuse me, sir, for having forgotten you for a moment. I have unexpectedly found—and I am delighted at my luck—a most agreeable travelling companion of mine, whom I left only a few days ago, when I returned to Paris. I could not resist giving him a hug. However," he added, "it seems to me that you know him too."

And, indeed, Lucien had indicated that Machefer was no stranger by holding out his hand to him, in his first impulse.

"Yes," said the purveyor, in order to prevent Lucien from making some mistake, "this young man is one of my clerks, and I am glad that he has met with a gentleman like you."

"The pleasure is all on my side. Your clerk is very agreeable society, and I am glad that I was able to help him to do a good action. He will tell you all about it, for I must take my leave."

"As you please, my dear sir," answered Machefer immediately, with suave politeness.

"How is business getting on? Are you pleased with your trip? Truffles will sell well this year, no doubt. So much the better! Good-bye. Allow me to keep the coach."

Then, without waiting for a reply, the stranger leaped into the coach and said a word to the driver, who whipped up his horses and disappeared with his vehicle round the corner of the Rue Montmartre.

The two friends stared at one another in utter amazement.

"Will you please explain to me——" began Lucien, after a moment's silence.

"I was about to ask you to explain to me," interrupted Machefer; "but this is not the place to do so, and I fear that we have but little time at our disposal. Go up to your room and I will follow."

The young man obeyed in utter amazement, and his friend joined him after a few moments had elapsed.

"Do you know who that rascal with the moustaches is?" inquired the purveyor.

"No; I asked you to tell me just now."

"Have you no idea?"

"Not the least in the world."

"Then you did not receive my letter?"

"Yes, I've had one letter—telling me that you had reached Périgueux."

"Ah! yes; the one that I sent off on the 29th did not go till the next day, and will not reach you till to-night. I came in a post-chaise as fast as I could, so that I am half-a-day ahead of the mail."

"Then you have brought me some news?" asked Lucien, eagerly.

"I should say so! Judge by this little bit. The man who was with you just now is the same man who travelled with me in the

coach to Périgueux, the man who was watching Bonnin, and whom Bonnin or his side was watching."

"Bah!"

"But as you have not received my last letter, you do not know his real name."

"No."

"Well, my dear boy, that gentleman is your promising cousin."

"My cousin! I have no cousin that I know of," said Lucien, still bewildered.

"The nephew of your uncle by marriage, if I must dot the i's."

"What! Maxime——"

"Yes, indeed, Maxime Trimoulac, who travelled with me under the name of Jean Gardilan," replied Machefer, "and who said that he was going to Périgord to buy horses for the king's guards. Now do you understand why he went there?"

"On account of the will, I suppose."

"Yes; that was it; and, like me and Bonnin, he also was looking for Zenobia Capitaine."

"He must have heard that she had my uncle's will, then?" said Lucien.

"It appears so," replied Machefer, "for I can assure you that he went there to see her. Fortunately his expedition was to no purpose."

"I cannot understand it," mused Thérèse's lover. "To go about like that, with a false name and the ways of a detective, such as you described in your first letter—why, this Maxime Trimoulac must be——"

"One of the police. Yes, he is," rejoined Machefer. "And he must be an important man in the force, for the authorities of the place did whatever he asked."

"I was not wrong, then, in my surmises," muttered Lucien, as his face clouded over.

"What do you mean? Has he been spying upon you, too?" was the eager inquiry. "How did you happen to be with him? Where and how did you meet him?"

"Accidentally, and in the strangest way. A number of coincidences of the most singular kind have occurred. I went out to-day——"

"In spite of my warnings?"

"Monsieur Vernède advised me to go somewhere else and find a lodging in the suburbs," replied Lucien. "It seems that your house is being watched."

"Good! that caps the climax," said Machefer, frowning. "Pray, go on!"

"Well, I went beyond the Barrière, and was looking for an inn or a lodging house, when all at once the king's landau came up as fast as it could, as usual. I stood aside in order not to be run over. Just at that moment the officer at the head of the escort was thrown, his horse fell, and I rushed to help him up."

"What an idea ! To help a guardsman, a royalist !"

"Bah ! he is a man, after all ; and you would have done the same if you had been in my place. But guess who it was ?—none other than the Marquis de Baffey !"

"The fellow who has those three hundred thousand francs in the hands of Thomas Vernède, and who wishes——"

"Who wishes to marry Mademoiselle Vernède. Yes, it was he. Was not that a strange chance ?"

"So strange that it scarcely seems possible," replied Machefer, looking glum. "But how about Trimoulac ?"

"He was behind me while I was helping the marquis to rise, and I neither heard him come up nor saw where he came from. However, he offered to help me to carry the injured man. Then a coach passed by, and, strange to say, it was the very coach that I rode in when I fought with that Prussian major !"

"That was bad."

"Fortunately the driver did not know me again—at least I believe not. I got in, much against my will, with that stranger, whom I instinctively mistrusted, and whom I tried to get rid of, but it was impossible. He remained with me until I took Monsieur de Baffey to a house in the Rue de Varennes, where that foolish old creature, his aunt, lives."

"The woman who made such a scene in Thomas's office ?" inquired Machefer.

"Yes, the very same. Well, after I had got rid of the marquis, I tried to get rid of that fellow Trimoulac. But no, he held on to me, and gave me no peace till I came here. If I had not met you, perhaps I should not have got rid of him at all. It seems certain that he wished to find out where I lived."

"Of course he did ! Do you know what my advice would be, Lucien ?"

"No—but, pray, let me have it."

"I advise you to go away."

"I intended to do so."

"I will add that you had better go at once ; but I must, first of all, tell you the news I bring. You ought to hear it without delay ; whereas, if we part, we may not meet again for more than twenty-four hours. Listen to what I have to say. I will be brief ; and, as Trimoulac does not know that you are going away, he may not have you disturbed to-day. Besides, whatever game he may be playing, he must form a plan ; and we have a few hours before us."

"I hope so. But before I listen to you let me tell you that one thing surprises me more than all the rest. If this fellow Trimoulac is spying upon me, he must know me. But how is it that he knows me ?"

"Who can say ? It suffices if he has ever met you before. Didn't you say that he had seen you when you were a boy ? He had not forgotten your face, perhaps."

"It may be so. Now tell me all about Zenobia. You saw her, eh ?"

"I saw and talked with her at my ease," replied Machefer. "But Zenobia is not the person we want now."

"What do you mean ?"

"It isn't she who has got the will."

"Indeed !"

"No. She did have it, but she has not got it now."

"What ! has it been taken from her ?"

"No ; but she entrusted it to some one."

"To whom, pray ?"

"To her niece."

"Her niece ; then she has a niece ?" And Lucien passed his hand over his forehead, as if he were getting bewildered.

"Yes," replied Machefer ; "and you must have known her when you were a boy, for she was brought up with you at the farm of Château Lévêque, and you are only two or three years older than she was."

"What is her name ?"

"Virginie."

"Virginie ! Ah ! yes—I remember," exclaimed Lucien. "Virginie Lasbaysses, was that the name ?"

"Yes. She is the daughter of the sutler's sister," said Machefer.

"That sister was my nurse."

"Yes, you are right."

"I remember the girl very well, now that you have mentioned her. She was far more intelligent than it is usual for a girl to be."

"She continued intelligent, and even grew very smart, at least so it appears."

"But I cannot understand it all as yet," said Lucien, who certainly did look perplexed. "You say that this young girl has the colonel's will. But she was not in Russia, I presume ?"

"No," replied Machefer. "Listen to me attentively, my dear boy, for you will not arrive at anything by idle guessing, and time presses. Let me tell you, in the first place, that your uncle died, not at Beresina, but a few days after the fray at Smolensk, to which place the Russians had removed him. The certificate of his death was made out at the military hospital there on the 5th December, 1812, and it will be easy to procure a copy. Before he died he made a will in your favour in his own handwriting, all duly dated and signed, and he confided it to Zenobia. Owing to circumstances, which it would take too long to recount, and which I must leave you to imagine, the sutler-woman, who was sent at first into the interior of Russia with other French prisoners, did not return until long after peace was signed. She arrived at Périgueux last June, at the very moment when you were fighting at Mont Saint-Jean."

"How is it that she did not write to me, in the meantime ?" asked Lucien.

"You are going too fast. Let me tell you everything methodically, or else you will not understand it at all. Zenobia arrived at Périgueux and went to her sister's house. This sister is the mother of Virginie, and keeps a little haberdashery shop. Our good friend the sutler had learnt to be prudent by dint of accompanying the army, and instead of announcing, as many women would have done, that she was the bearer of a mission from Colonel Lacaussade, she began by making inquiries."

"That was wise, indeed," remarked Lucien, who was all attention.

"She then learnt," continued Machefer, "that Trimoulac was trying to get possession of his uncle's property, but had not yet succeeded in doing so. She also learnt that you had not been seen in Périgord for several years, and that you lived in Paris; but she could not obtain your address. She then thought of writing and trusting to chance in hopes you would get the letter."

"What! did Zenobia write to me?"

"Yes, my dear boy. She wrote, or rather dictated, a letter—for she cannot write at all. It was addressed to Monsieur Lucien Bellefond, lieutenant in the 25th Regiment of the Line, Paris, and it was posted on the 28th of June."

"But I never received it," protested the young ex-officer.

"You need not tell me that. If you had received it, the colonel's will would have been in your hands long ago."

"But, dear me! what became of the letter, then?" asked Lucien.

"I do not know for certain. I suspect, however, that it was not lost to everybody; and if you wish me to tell you my opinion, it is that it fell into the hands of that man Bonnin, the fellow who is trying to sell the will to you."

"If I thought that——"

"I should advise you to say nothing, even if you were sure of it. The harm is done on that side, and we cannot alter it; but the evil is not without a remedy, as this Bonnin was in Périgueux when I was there myself, and if he has returned to Paris, it is because he is no better off than when he started on the trip. The old rascal has sold the bear's skin before killing the bear; and I think that he is much less to be feared than Maxime Trimoulac. However, this is not all. You protested just now, when I told you that Zenobia had written to you. What would you say if I told you that you had answered her?"

"I?" exclaimed Lucien, with an air of bewilderment comical to behold.

"Yes, you. Or at least the letter which she received on the morrow of the day when her letter left for Paris was signed with your name."

"What did it contain?"

"An urgent request to come to Paris at once, where you were waiting for her; so it was stated."

"And the forger of the letter—for it was a forgery—probably gave my address?"

"I think not; but I must tell you that I did not see this letter bearing your name, and for a very good reason, which I will tell you of. As for Zenobia, who heard it read, she was not able to recall the name of the street in which you were said to live."

"And who can be the author of this infernal trickery?" gasped Thérèse's lover, in absolute consternation.

"Humph! I should not be surprised if it were Trimoulac," rejoined Machefer, "but we will look into all that later on. You must first be told what result this false letter led to. Zenobia a few days after her arrival made up her mind not to start for Paris in person, for she does not know her way about, but to send her niece there in her stead."

"That Virginie Lasbaysses, whom you mentioned—the girl I played with when I was a child?"

"Yes; she is now a young woman of twenty-two, as brave as a man, and smart enough to trick all Fouché's detectives. She has a powerful frame and a strong arm. She is exactly what her aunt was when young. Well, let me proceed. This girl, who is as bold as she is devoted, offered to take the will, and declared that she would keep out of all the traps that might be set for her, and would speedily find you in Paris. Zenobia accepted this almost heroic offer, and told her niece to write to you that she would come at once, which she did in the letter that you did not receive. The cunning sutler-woman had taken the precaution to say that it was she, not Virginie, who was coming. She thus hoped to throw any one off the scent, supposing the letter fell into the hands of any people who were badly disposed. Now this is what really happened——"

"It is perhaps lucky for us that she did so," interrupted the young ex-lieutenant.

"I think so; but let me finish," replied Machefer. "The aunt and niece were at this point when the false letter arrived. Then there was another difficulty. It was stated in this letter that Zenobia was expected in Paris in such a street, at such a number, by her dear Lucien Bellefond, whose name was appended to the missive. If she had taken the precaution to show this letter to your farmer down there, who knows your handwriting, she would have found out the trick at once; but she did not think of that, and had not time to make any inquiries. So Virginie, fitted out for the trip, went to wait for the coach at a stage beyond Périgueux; she there found a vacant seat, and started. It is needless to say that she had the colonel's will with her, together with the letter which was supposed to have come from you, and which, as it contained your address, was to help her to find your lodgings."

"That is why the sutler-woman could not show you the note," said Lucien.

"Exactly. And now, my dear friend, that is how we are situated."

"What ! hasn't Zenobia seen her niece since then ?"

"She has neither seen her nor heard from her," retorted Machefer, emphatically.

"This is very strange, indeed ! Still, the niece must have come to Paris !

"Everything leads me to believe so."

"But I have never seen her."

"That is not surprising, as she did not have your real address. What is surprising though, is that she did not look for you elsewhere when she failed to find you at the address given ; that she did not go to the Minister of War or the offices of the governor of Paris, and that then, finding her efforts to be vain, she did not return to Périgueux."

"The traitor must have got her to his house and have made away with her," said Lucien, with a frown.

"I thought of that ; but it does not agree with another supposition which seems to me very plausible. I believe that it was Trimoulac who wrote in your name. Now, if Virginie had gone to the address he gave her, whether he killed her or not, it is clear that he would not have gone to Périgueux in disguise, trying to get round the sutler-woman. He would have had the will in his possession and have destroyed it. Either it wasn't Trimoulac who forged your signature, or else Virginie did not go to his house when she reached Paris."

"There is nothing to be said in such a dilemma as this. However, we must find out what has become of her."

"I have returned for the express purpose of looking for her," replied Machefer.

"And do you hope to succeed ?"

"Yes ; but it will take time, and I fear that we have but little before us."

"True ; for Monsieur Vernède has to make his payment to the marquis."

"That is not everything ; the thing is that we may be arrested. I am more mistrustful than ever of that scamp Trimoulac. I wish I knew where the rascal lives."

"Didn't he tell you ?" asked Lucien.

"He was not such a fool," replied Machefer. "He gave me his card with 'Jean Gardilan, horse-dealer, No. 175 Rue du Gros-Cailloü,' upon it ; but you may well believe that that address is as false as the name was. I shall not take the trouble to go there. And you know no more than I do about it, I suppose ?"

"I know even less. He did not give me any false name, for he did not speak of his name at all while we were together."

"I suppose not. Monsieur Trimoulac belongs to the political police, I presume, and does not commit any imprudent act. See how quickly he works ! He must have reached Paris last night, only a few hours before me, and yet he is already at our heels."

"But that is purely accidental."

"How do you know? Where did you meet him?" inquired Machefer, who was looking anxious.

"I have already told you. He came up at the moment when I was helping the marquis on the road."

"Yes, I remember now." And the purveyor became thoughtful. "You did not hear him coming, nor see where he came from?" he added.

"No; but I have a suspicion."

"What is it?"

"A moment before this affair I was passing the Buttes Montmartre, and, to my very great surprise, I caught sight of a man coming out of the opening——"

"What! the entrance of the cavern?"

"Yes, my friend; I am sure of that."

"The devil!" growled Machefer. "This is quite alarming! Who was this man?"

"I do not know him."

"How was he dressed? Did he look like a workman, or a shopman, or what?"

"He looked more like a man in comfortable circumstances, so far as I could see, for he had his back to me."

"You followed him, I suppose?"

"At once, and I did not let him get out of sight. Unfortunately, he did not once turn, and, when he was a few hundred paces ahead, he went into a house."

"Where you did not dare to follow him?"

"No; I was afraid of some trap."

"You were right, perhaps, but let us return to Trimoulac. What has he to do with this?" said Machefer.

"Well, the accident to the marquis took place near the house in question, and there was no one in sight at the moment when the horse fell, that is, excepting the king's escort. When I suddenly found a man behind me it occurred to me that this fellow was perhaps the same one whom I had been following, and who had been looking through some crack in the shutters, and had come out to follow me in his turn."

"Was he dressed in the same way?"

"No, or it appeared not to me. But he may have changed his clothes."

"And this man was Trimoulac, eh?"

"So you have just informed me yourself."

Machefer reflected for a moment, and then he said: "All this agrees very well. It may be that on his return from Périgueux, before he had even taken off his boots, he found some orders from Fouché awaiting him, concerning the Freemasons; we must have been denounced over and over again since the return of the Bourbons. He had heard of the meetings in the quarry; he had been told of the

secret passage, and as he is very active, he went there himself just to reconnoitre. You say that he allowed you to follow him without looking back, and took refuge in a house——”

“An isolated house where he must live all alone.”

“And where, hidden behind the shutters, he could see you. Ah! ah! Well, and so then, having recognised you, he followed you to find out where you lived. You had probably been pointed out to him as a mason, but he perhaps knows all, that you are a rival as regards the colonel's inheritance, and that is a reason the more for his keeping after you. So, as I said before, you must go away.” The ex-army purveyor paused for a moment, and then resumed: “I have certain measures to take to ensure my own personal safety, for he has found me now. The rascal isn't fool enough to believe that you are my clerk, he must have already guessed that I have been assisting you as regards the affair of the will. We were the best friends in the world while we were in Périgueux, and he fully believed what I told him, as he confided in me. Here, however, we shall be enemies, and I must be prepared for the onslaught.”

“I am afraid that we shall be defeated,” said Lucien, who had a mournful expression of face.

“Bah! we must not be discouraged, although it be an ill wind that blows no good. At least this mishap enables us to discover where Trimoulac lives, and that is a piece of information I particularly wished for. Where is the house which he entered so as to escape you?”

“It is No. 13 Chaussée de Clignancourt.”

“That is strange! It seems to me that I have heard of that house before,” muttered Machefer.

“You have heard it mentioned, and under circumstances that you can scarcely have forgotten,” replied Lucien, lowering his voice.

“When? where?”

“Why, in the vaults at Montmartre, on the night of the walling-up. Surely you recollect.”

“Ah! yes. I remember now. It was there that that vile Chevalier de Loupiac was captured, the fellow whose defence you undertook.”

“And who was walled up in spite of my objections.”

“Yes; and the Grand Mason was obliged to turn you out to quiet you. But are you sure that the house is the same?”

“I saw the name of the street, and the number of the house with my own eyes,” replied Lucien.

“Well, it is very strange! but, perhaps, it is less so than it appears. Why shouldn't Trimoulac have known this Loupiac, who was a spy like himself, and who belonged to the political police? It is quite possible that he may be occupying this house now that his estimable colleague has disappeared.”

“Why not, indeed? That supposition makes me feel all the more certain that it was really Trimoulac whom I followed without

seeing his face," said Lucien. "By the way, one thing that has always surprised me is that the murder of that wretched chevalier never led to any prosecution."

"You forget that no one has ever known that he was executed. Fouché and his gang undoubtedly believe that Chevalier de Loupiac has left for foreign parts, and possibly they are waiting for him. They will wait a long time. Oh! that was indeed a skilful stroke on the part of the Grand Mason."

"Too skilful," retorted Lucien. "I can never think of it without a shudder. You knew this Loupiac, did you not?"

"I? Not at all, and he did not know me, I believe. Besides, I thought I told you," added Machefer, "all that I knew respecting this man when we were over there by the Buttes."

"You said that he had become a mason under the name of Mulot, I believe; and that he had seen almost all of us at the meetings he attended."

"Oh! then I did not explain myself very clearly, or you did not understand me. On the contrary, this man fortunately never had anything to do with any of our friends, excepting a few of them; had he known us we should have been denounced like many others whom he caused to be arrested. It is true that he did not have time to effect his purpose. The only one of us who knows him well enough to recognise him anywhere is the Grand Mason himself."

"I, myself, have never seen the Grand Mason's face," muttered Lucien. "Upon my word, ours is a strange association, indeed!"

"This mystery must exist when people conspire," replied Machefer, with a shrug of the shoulders. "I do not know our chief's face any better than you do, and I shall probably never know it, for the society seems to me to be entirely broken up."

"So much the better!" was Lucien's reply. "I have never cared to belong to it since that dreadful night. Heaven forbid that we should ever have to repent of having been present at that affair, for Maxime Trimoulac may be following in the footsteps of the other spy, the Chevalier de Loupiac."

"That is what I fear," said Machefer, promptly, "and the more so as this house, this No. 13, I now remember, cannot be the place where the chevalier lived. In fact, it was merely a kind of meeting-house where he met subordinate spies and arranged his infamous plans. This fellow Trimoulac evidently uses it for similar purposes; but it matters little now. My plans are made. You must go away to-night. Frantz will give you the clothes of one of my clerks, and you must go out through the shop. He will take you to the house of a sister of his, who lives near Charonne. When you are once in safety, and I no longer have any cause to feel anxious about you, I will search for Virginie. The great point is to find out where she went on reaching Paris."

"Could she have gone to No. 13 Chaussée de Clignancourt?" suggested Lucien.

"What an idea ! If Trimoulac wrote the false letter he would have taken good care not to ask her to go to the mean mouse-trap where that Chevalier de Loupiac was then in the habit of resorting. The matter of the will was one that concerned him personally, and he evidently would not have cared to bring the police into it."

"I think that you are right," responded Lucien, "and——"

At this moment, however, three knocks, between each of which there was a short interval, were heard at the door.

Both Machefer and Lucien started, and looked anxiously at one another.

"That is the usual announcement of a message from the Grand Mason," said Machefer to his friend, in a low tone.

"He has chosen a bad time," muttered Lucien, who was annoyed by this interruption.

"Well, I shall open the door," rejoined the provision dealer. "We shall know what it is, and act accordingly."

He thereupon rose up and went to the portal, which he had carefully bolted on entering the room. When the door opened Lucien's surprise was great indeed to see M. Vernède on the threshold.

"What, is it you, Thomas ?" exclaimed Machefer. "Did you know that I had returned, then ?"

"No ; but I hoped that you had, as what I have to tell you is so urgent and so serious." And then, turning to Lucien, the banker added :

"I did not expect to find you here, my friend."

"I went away this morning, as I told you I should do, but I have returned on account of some very peculiar occurrences——"

"Which you must relate some other time. Let Thomas speak," interrupted Machefer ; "he did not come for nothing."

"No ; for our lives are in danger. The masons have been denounced."

"The masons ?" exclaimed Lucien, in amazement.

"Yes, my dear Bellefond," resumed M. Vernède, "the masons, to whom I belong as well as you and Machefer. I did not tell you before that I belonged to the association."

"I have never seen you at any of its meetings, certainly——"

"That may be ; however, my friend, I have no reason for hiding this secret from you any longer, and you may remain and hear all that I have to say to Machefer."

"What is it ?" asked the purveyor, who was both anxious and impatient.

"The Chevalier de Loupiac is alive," was the banker's solemn response.

"Loupiac ?" exclaimed Lucien and Machefer in one breath. Their amazement was great indeed.

"Yes ; Loupiac the traitor, who has betrayed us all, the man whom we arrested, tried, and condemned to death."

"Impossible! Are you mad?" demanded Machefer, clutching the banker's arm.

"No. I have seen him as plainly as I now see you."

"When, pray?"

"Not an hour ago."

"Where?"

"On the Pont-Neuf, at the entrance of the Place Dauphine. He was talking to the driver of a coach from which he had just alighted."

"A driver!" exclaimed young Bellefond, excitedly, struck by a sudden thought.

"Yes; and the coach waited for him on the Quai des Orfèvres, while he—the knave—slipped stealthily into the Rue de Jerusalem."

"What does this Chevalier de Loupiac look like? You know that I have never seen him," said Machefer.

"Well, he wore a black wig to-day and waxed moustaches, and no one but I could have recognised him."

"A black wig—waxed moustaches!" gasped the purveyor. "Oh! then—but, yes—it's the very same man!"

"What do you mean?"

"Why the man who travelled with me in the coach to Périgueux, of course."

"The one whom you called Gardilan in your first letter?"

"Exactly; and do you know who this Gardilan really is? Why, he is Maxime Trimoulac, the heir-at-law of Colonel Lacaussade, and his nephew; and if we do not find the missing will, why, he will inherit the property."

"How do you know that it is the same man that I just met?" asked Vernède, puzzled.

"Had not the driver of the coach a yellow coat, with several capes," demanded Lucien, eagerly.

"Yes, like most coachmen."

"Was the number of the hack 1669?" resumed the young fellow.

"Yes," replied the banker.

"I knew it!" then exclaimed Lucien. "So Trimoulac and the Chevalier de Loupiac are one and the same."

"That is evident, and you see that Loupiac is still alive," replied Thomas Vernède.

"But, if he is alive, an innocent man was put to death in his place?" urged Bellefond.

"That seems unfortunately to be true," murmured Machefer.

"Ah! I was right," said Lucien, indignantly, "when I declared that the pretended justice of the Grand Mason was but an abominable act of murder!"

Thomas Vernède started, and then drew himself up to his full height. Finally, going towards his daughter's affianced lover, he seized him by the arm, and said quietly: "I am the Grand Mason!"

"You!" exclaimed the young man, who had turned very pale, and seemed as if about to faint.

"Yes, I!" said Vernède, proudly, "and I give you back your promise, my friend. You must shrink from entering the family of a man who ordered an abominable murder. You are free."

"Forgive me!" stammered Lucien.

"Come, Thomas, you must overlook idle words. We have something else to attend to besides reproaching one another," said Machefer.

"You are right, let us remain friends," said the banker, holding out his hand to Lucien, who took it eagerly. "Concord was never more necessary between us, as we have a terrible task ahead, and I must know all. Did this Trimoulac return from Périgueux at the same time as yourself?"

"He came back before I did. He must have reached Paris last night, whereas I only arrived just now."

"Does he know that you are here?"

"He left me in the Rue du Jour, in front of my own door. We said that we should see each other again."

"He saw Lucien, then?"

"He had passed an hour with him in a coach, owing to a very strange meeting, which I will tell you about. Lucien must leave this house to-night."

"It will be too late then. Lucien must go at once," said Vernède.

"But you are both of you in as much danger as I am," observed the young fellow.

"No; it is you alone whom this man wishes to injure, for he does not know me, although I know him so well; he does not dream that I am the Grand Mason."

"He has no interest in acting against me," added Machefer, "for he never saw me except in Périgord, where we were very good friends."

"You see, my dear Lucien," said the banker, "that you are the only one about whom we need trouble ourselves."

"I have found a place for him at Charonne with Frantz's sister," rejoined the provision dealer, "and when it is dark he can go out through the shop."

"It will be better for him to go now. If that miserable spy be really the colonel's heir, as no doubt he is, he will be anxious to rid himself at once of such a dangerous opponent as Lucien, and he has no doubt gone to obtain a warrant against our friend under some pretext or other."

"He has a very good pretext at hand if he is the Chevalier de Loupiac who betrayed the masons once before. But I cannot get over it, I cannot believe in this resurrection, for it is one. A man who was walled in a pillar——"

"Oh! he was not walled up," interrupted the banker.

"Of course not, for if he had been walled up in flesh and blood,

he could not have got out. There must be some mistake. But then, who was punished in his place ? ”

Vernède was trying to find some answer to this question, as great a puzzle as the riddles of the Sphinx, when hurried footsteps were heard on the stairs.

Machefer ran to the door, which he had neglected to bolt again when his friend the banker entered ; but he was too late, and the precaution would have served no purpose.

The door opened, and a commissary of police, wearing his scarf of office, appeared at the door, followed by four gendarmes, who stopped upon the landing.

“ We are caught,” muttered Machefer, who was striving to appear calm.

However, to his great astonishment, the commissary pushed the door to, behind him, leaving the men outside, and then in the politest tone imaginable, inquired : “ Which of you gentlemen is named Bellefond ? ”

“ It is I, sir,” replied Lucien, promptly.

“ Were you recently a lieutenant in the 25th Regiment of the Line ? ”

“ I was.”

“ Then you must follow me at once. I am the bearer of a warrant for your arrest.”

“ Very well,” replied the young fellow. “ May I inquire, however, what charge is brought against me ? ”

“ I have no reason for hiding from you the fact that you are called upon to account for the death of a foreign officer, who was found dead in a hired coach during the month of July last.”

Lucien drew a long breath, while Vernède and Machefer exchanged glances of surprise.

They had expected an accusation of conspiracy which would have included all of them ; but this was only a charge of murder or manslaughter, of which Lucien could easily clear himself. They could scarcely believe in their good fortune.

The commissary, however, now set them still more at their ease by saying :

“ I know, gentlemen, that I am in the house of an honourable merchant, who, being the friend of Monsieur Lucien Bellefond, could not do otherwise than shelter him. The king's government does not wish to annoy any quiet person, and I can assure you that no one will be troubled on account of this matter, which will perhaps be cleared up satisfactorily. Indeed, I hope that it will have no serious results,” he added, turning to Lucien.

“ I will follow you, sir,” said the young man, who contented himself with pressing his friends' hands, and whispering in the banker's ear, as he passed by : “ Do not tell her that I have been arrested.”

Vernède understood that he alluded to Thérèse, and gave him a significant glance, while he placed himself beside the gendarmes.

XIII.

IN the early days of September, after a long, dull month, the house in the Rue d'Enfer had suddenly assumed a look of gaiety that excited a great deal of remark in the neighbourhood.

The front shutters, which had been closed for several weeks, were now again open, and the majestic person of Madame Boutard had appeared several times at the window. She seemed to be on the look-out for some one, to be impatiently awaiting an arrival. It was also remarked that the Bourdaches were constantly going and coming, and that a somewhat mean-looking individual, who had never been seen before, had made his appearance in the house.

M. Bonnin had but few neighbours, still he had some, and they took an interest in what went on at his house. They were ignorant, however, of the great event that had upset the whole establishment, for none of them had ever entered the place.

The master of the house had returned the previous evening from his adventurous journey, and had stayed there all night, contrary to his usual custom. It may easily be believed that he was warmly received by Clarisse, who was dying of love, impatience, and weariness, and also by the governess, who had had a great deal of trouble to keep the young beauty within bounds.

Bonnin was petted and feasted and questioned as to the result of his journey, but he proved very reserved.

He certainly confessed that he had not brought back the Golden Fleece; but he took good care not to discourage his dear daughter, for he told her that he believed that he would soon bring matters to a happy conclusion.

He even went so far as to promise her that she should soon see the young officer again, and that this time Lucien would not be disposed to fly off when a mutually advantageous marriage was suggested to him.

The interview which Saint-Privat *alias* Bonnin had with the fair Julie was longer and more serious. He had not written to her since the 17th of August, and had told her nothing satisfactory on that occasion. He thus now had a great deal to relate, and the ex-belle of the Directory expected to hear all about the whole affair. She was somewhat disappointed, however, for the old man contented himself with stating that he had the necessary clues to the whole matter, one being at Périgueux, and the other in Paris, and that he was sure that Zenobia had confided the will to a woman—a woman,

he added, whom he was confident he would be able to find, though to do so, he must, first of all, confer with his agent Cornillon.

Bourdache, who was sent to fetch the spy, had a great deal of trouble to find him, and it was not until the afternoon that he made his appearance. He met his master in the garden where Lucien had sat so often during his convalescence, and where Saint-Privat found himself so snug—far from all who could overhear.

The master was pleasant and familiar, and the subordinate deferential; and after a hasty exchange of compliments, they began to talk business.

"What did you find out during my absence?" inquired Clarisse's father.

"A great many things concerning the man who followed you in the gardens of the Palais-Royal on the day when——"

"Yes, I know; but you are not aware that I have recently been travelling with him."

"Where?"

"Why, I went with him to Périgord, of course," replied Saint-Privat.

"Then that is why he has not been seen in Paris for a month past," remarked Cornillon.

"Exactly. He has been trying all this time to thwart me with regard to the will, and I now know why he went to ask for Zenobia Capitaine's letters. I now only need some information as regards the life he leads here, and the places where he lodges. I say places, for he must have more abodes than one, the rascal!"

"Oh, he has several residences, as you will see. But to my story. In the first place, Number 15 and Number 33 had told me the truth. Our man belongs to the political brigade, and is working under Fouché's immediate control. He naturally sports several names; but he is best known by that of Loupiac."

"That isn't his real name, as I now know," interrupted Saint-Privat.

"That may be, master. However, in Rovigo's time he went on a mission to Spain. Once there he went over to Wellington, and then to the Bourbons, whom he secretly served all the while. He is now in high favour at the 'house,' and it is said that it was he who caught Labédoyère."

"That is not true," interrupted Saint-Privat. "He was down there in Périgord with me at the very time when the colonel was arrested, but no matter. Come to the question of his lodgings—that interests me the most."

"And that is what gave me the most trouble. However, in the first place, he has a very handsome set of rooms in the Rue Neuvedes-Petits Champs. He goes there but seldom, however, and only when he has to receive some one and make a great display. He never sleeps there at all. His real abode is in the Rue de la Grange-Batelière, at Number 16, where he's very thick with a certain

baroness, a very handsome woman, known to the whole neighbourhood, and, in fact, to all Paris, as Zoé de Sainte-Gauburge. She's his mistress."

"Good! he must have gone there on his arrival, then?" exclaimed the ex-director of the dark room.

"Very likely," replied Cornillon. "But it is not easy, so I hear, to see him when he is there."

"I will undertake to do so. However, go on!"

"He also has a kind of hiding-place in the suburbs, and not far from the city gate."

"Where is it?"

"On the Chaussée de Clignancourt, Number 13. It is a little pavilion standing between a court and garden, and it's very pretty, upon my word!"

"He goes there to amuse himself, no doubt."

"No; I think, on the contrary, that he goes there for business purposes."

"What makes you think so?"

"Oh! a strange story that Number 33 told me a few days ago—one of the men, you know, who gave me the first information about him."

"Tell me what he said."

"Well, then, it seems that one night, about two months ago, Number 33 was sent to take an order to Chevalier de Loupiac at the place I've just mentioned, in the Chaussée de Clignancourt. Fouché gave him the mission, for although he was not minister at the time, he was not far from it, and my friend Number 33, who had served under him before, offered to do this job for him."

"Never mind the details. For heaven's sake, come to the point!" said Saint Privat, impatiently.

"I must enter into particulars, so that you may understand the matter better. It seems that the Chevalier de Loupiac had been to Gonesse, to the headquarters of the English army, and that he was to bring back Wellington's reply to the people who were managing the capitulation. Number 33 had been told to go to the pavilion, and wait there for the chevalier until he saw him."

"Did he find him?" asked Saint-Privat, somewhat impatiently.

"No, and this is the strange part of the story. Number 33 had a key of the gate, and knew the place. He got there at nine, and at once went round the house. The room where he expected to find Loupiac was at the back, on the ground floor. He saw a light there, and, as he is naturally cautious, he went up softly to see whether Loupiac was alone or not. What did he see, however, but a young man of the chevalier's height, but not the chevalier himself. This young man was walking up and down the room. He was about as tall as Loupiac, but more slender. This seemed strange to my friend, and he looked again. Well, the young man seated himself at a table and began to write; so Number 33 determined to wait till

Loupiac appeared, as his errand was with him, and with nobody else. He hid himself in the garden behind a big tree, and waited. He had not been there five minutes when he heard some one walking softly on the gravel-walk. He held his breath and stared with all his might."

"Well, what did he see?" asked the old man, who was beginning to be interested by this curious story.

"Oh! Four or five men came stealthily in. My comrade took care not to stir, and it was well for him that he didn't move. The new-comers began to look through the window, then they pushed open the door, and all at once they sprung upon the man at the table."

"Did they kill him?" eagerly asked the ex-director of the dark room, peaceable though he was.

"That is just what Number 33 could not see, as they began by upsetting the lights, and the rest of the work was done in the dark. However, he saw them go out ten minutes after, carrying the young man's body with them. They had him in a sack. As you may naturally suppose, Number 33 did not venture to run after the rascals, who would certainly have killed him if he had."

While listening to the end of this story, Saint-Privat had shown signs of uneasiness, and now that it was finished, he fell into deep thought.

"Can you tell me the exact date of this occurrence?" said he, at last.

"No, for I was not there," replied Cornillon, "but Number 33 said that it was on a Sunday, a day or two before the capitulation of Paris."

"Then it must have been Sunday, July the 2nd, and that letter was dated the 28th of June," muttered the old man to himself.

"That may be," replied Cornillon, who had caught what Saint-Privat said.

"But, let me see," resumed Clarisse's father, "how was the young man in question dressed, and what was his general appearance?"

"He was not very tall, as I have already told you; he had rather long black hair, a small waist, and narrow shoulders. He wore a travelling suit, a cloak with a cape, top-boots, and a broad-brimmed hat."

"Didn't your friend hear him say anything when these men pounced upon him?"

"Oh! he hadn't time to speak, it appears. They threw themselves upon him suddenly, and Number 33 thinks that they began by gagging him. He only saw that the poor devil had laid two pistols upon the table, and that the fellow who seemed to be the leader of the band put the weapons in his pocket."

"What did Number 33 do when the gang had gone?"

"He kept quiet for about an hour or so, to see whether Loupiac would come, and as he did not, he went away."

"To report to Fouché, I suppose?"

"Yes, but he did not find him at his house on the Quai Malaquais. The duke was in conference with the marshals who were intrusted with the defence of Paris. On the following day he was still unable to see him; in fact, all the important people were so busy. On the day after that the capitulation took place, and everybody in the police force expected to be discharged. Nobody knew which way to turn. Bonaparte, the Bourbons, and the Emperor Alexander, all had to be dealt with, and not a man was sure of his berth. My friend Number 33, who had plenty of prudence, did not say anything, and it was all the better for him."

"But didn't Fouché ask for his report?"

"No, the duke was only thinking of how he could manage to get appointed minister."

"But Number 33 kept his place?"

"Yes, like all the rest. Folks know very well at the palace that it is not so easy to get an efficient police force together. They kept everybody, and they did right. I have been told that some one advised Louis XVIII. to sleep in Bonaparte's bed, and he did so."

"His Majesty is a sensible man, there's no denying it," said Saint-Privat, gravely. "But tell me, Number 33's reserve did not prevent him from talking to an old comrade, I see; and indeed on the first occasion, when you asked him about our man, he ought to have told you all he knew, instead of telling you only part. Why did he keep such a lot back till later on?"

"Prudence, sir; it was prudence that restrained him. The first time I questioned him he did not know how the chevalier would stand with the new government, whereas he guessed that you were out of work. Put yourself in his place. He has no private means, and he is the father of a family. All that we could expect of him was that he wouldn't lie to us, and he hasn't lied. He says that Loupiac belongs to the political brigade, and that we had better be on our guard. That is as much as we could expect."

"Then why did he give you these additional particulars lately?"

"Oh! things have changed. The 'house' is reorganised. There is no further overthrow to be feared. The Duke of Otranto is minister, and he has no scruples. He knows that police agents have no opinions, and don't need them any more than a cook needs gloves. He simply asks the agents to work conscientiously, and that is all. That is why my friend is so easy now. He knows that he won't be troubled about the past, and that is why he has been so confidential after proving so close at first."

"Then he told you all that happened at the Chaussée Clignancourt without your pressing him?" asked Saint-Privat.

"No; on the contrary, I had to question him closely. I should not perhaps have succeeded if he hadn't known that Loupiac was going to leave the 'house.' It is said that Loupiac has made a fortune, and that he is going to bid farewell to Fouché and the whole business. He has not been seen among us for two months past."

"Yes, I do not believe that he will stay in the service any longer. But there is one thing that I have a great interest in clearing up. Did your friend carry his discretion so far as not to tell this story to Loupiac himself ?"

"Of course ! and he had no great merit in keeping it secret, for the chevalier has not appeared at the 'house' lately. Number 33 has only heard of him through me, and that was when I told him about his following you and being at the post-office. Then, when he knew the truth, and could have told him about the affair of that Sunday night, why, Loupiac had suddenly disappeared again. Our friend Number 33 had heard that he had gone on a journey, so that he would have to wait to speak to him."

"Then the chevalier doesn't know anything ?"

"No, probably not, unless Number 33 has found a means of meeting him, which must have been since yesterday."

"Where could he have seen him ?" said Saint-Privat, pondering all the while.

"I don't know, but I can tell you that he has watched for him, and knows his habits well. It was Number 33 who told me about all the various abodes in the Rue-Neuve-des-Petits-Champs and the Rue de la Grange-Batelière."

"Then you think that——"

"I think that Number 33 must have heard of Loupiac's arrival and hastened to see him. He knows that the chevalier is rich, and hopes to be well paid for his information."

Saint-Privat said no more, but began to walk up and down, without noticing Cornillon any further.

He had been enlightened in various ways by what the police-agent had told him.

During the last few days, in Périgord, he had by no means lost his time. Realising that he had been going on the wrong track, as Zenobia did not know how to read or write, and that his own voluntary imprisonment could lead to nothing, he had changed his plans.

He had made use of the time remaining to him when he was set at liberty to collect all the information that he could obtain with regard to the sutler-woman's family, and had concluded that she had sent some one in her place to look for Lucien Bellefond. Moreover, he had finally discovered that this messenger must be a certain niece of Zenobia's, of whose existence and departure from Périgueux he heard from twenty different people.

On this certain basis the ingenious Saint-Privat had built up various conjectures, one of which had a deal of probability about it.

He remembered, for instance, that when making his first inquiries as to the travellers who had arrived in Paris from Périgord at the beginning of July, he had heard that a young man had got into the mail-coach at a stage beyond Périgueux, and had told the courier that he was going to Belgium to look for his father, an officer, who had been wounded at Mont Saint-Jean,

Recollecting this, Saint-Privat now thought that this young fellow might have been Zenobia's niece in a disguise which she had assumed to throw those who were likely to annoy her off the track. In order to make certain on this point, he interviewed all the mail-coach couriers, and as, when they passed through Périgueux, they all stopped at the hotel where he was staying, he was able to ply his questions, and finally learnt from one of them that the young man in question, who had had no baggage with him, had left the coach at Villejuif and gone on afoot into Paris. This was a more significant clue than any of the rest.

The indefatigable Saint-Privat did not stop at this, however. By dint of inquiring in all directions, and talking with maids and bootblacks at the various hotels in Périgueux, he found out that Zenobia's niece had gone off in consequence of receiving a letter from Paris. Thereupon he unhesitatingly concluded, with the aptitude of a detective, that this letter had been written in Lucien Bellefond's name.

A fortunate chance finally revealed to him that Gardilan, his odious persecutor, was none other than Maxime Trimoulac, the colonel's heir-at-law.

The decisive clue was now found. It was evident that Trimoulac had written a false letter, and that the niece, caught by the snare, had started off to meet him. It was also evident that she had not seen him, since he had since been obliged to go disguised to Périgueux.

The solution of the problem could now only be found in Paris, and Saint-Privat started for the capital without troubling himself about his new acquaintance, the truffle-seller.

He wished to outstrip Maxime Trimoulac, who had packed up and absconded; and he (Saint-Privat) had returned to the Rue d'Enfer, anxious to learn from Cornillon the result of the inquiries which he had told him to make in his absence.

This result was now made known to him.

Cornillon's report acquainted him with more than he had expected to learn as to the adventures of Zenobia's niece on her arrival in Paris, and a great advantage in all this was that he now, perhaps, knew more about her than did Maxime Trimoulac himself.

Saint-Privat, with his sagacious mind, did not hesitate to conclude, from what Cornillon had told him, that the said niece had been led by the false letter to repair to the little house on the Chaussée de Clignancourt, and that she had there unfortunately fallen into the hands of people who were Trimoulac's enemies, and who had seized upon her in his place, no doubt mistaking her identity on account of her attire. Everything made this seem probable—the date of the occurrence, the attire, and the general appearance of the individual upon whom the unknown men had pounced.

Now what had become of this individual, this seeming man? He had evidently been harshly handled, but had he been killed or

merely hidden away? Nothing was known on that point. They were only acquainted with the kidnapping. Cornillon, when closely questioned, declared that his friend knew nothing more.

Now, it was evident that the victim of the attempt, wherever she might be, had the colonel's will about her. The only thing, then, was to find her, dead or alive. This was the problem that Saint-Privat was trying to solve as he walked hastily up and down the gravel-walk.

Cornillon scratched his nose with the air of a philosopher as he watched his employer walking to and fro like a madman, and this unaccustomed air of agitation in so quiet a man greatly astonished him.

But there were abundant reasons for agitation, however, for Saint-Privat was asking himself whether he had not better make up his mind to sacrifice a part of his expectations by coming to an agreement with his antagonist.

This antagonist was not Lucien, who seemed to be out of the running on account of the course which events had taken, but Maxime Trimoulac, who was the only man interested in suppressing the colonel's will, just as Lucien was the only man interested in producing that document.

Now, Maxime Trimoulac, who had gone to Périgueux under a false name, had not amused himself with confiding in Bonnin, whom he had met on his way. But Bonnin, that is to say, Saint-Privat, supposed very reasonably that the said Trimoulac had not been discouraged by his first failure, and had not remained inactive during his sojourn in Zenobia Capitaine's native town.

He must have found out, for instance, all that he, Saint-Privat, had ascertained respecting Zenobia's niece. It was even likely that he had found out all about her starting for Paris.

Accordingly, there were now but two courses open to the fond father of the statuesque Clarisse. He must be more rapid than his rival in finding the woman who held the will, or he must treat with that rival himself.

The first plan would have suited him the best. His arrangements with Lucien Bellefond were all complete. He knew that the lieutenant would keep his word under any circumstances, and pay him the million, supposing he received the will from his hands.

There was no difficulty whatever as to the upshot of the negotiations with Lucien, at least so far as the latter personally was concerned; and Saint-Privat, like all such cunning men, liked above all to treat with upright persons, for scoundrels especially set store by honesty in business relations with others.

However, this plan was far from being the easier of the two. The track of Zenobia's niece, after being miraculously followed up to the little house on the Chaussée de Clignancourt, was now lost, and Saint-Privat, think as he might, could not hit upon any scheme that would enable him to recover the clue.

Moreover, Cornillon was no more competent than himself in that respect, and Number 33 had certainly not seen more than he had related.

One man alone might be able to tell the end of the story, and that man was Maxime Trimoulac. He alone knew what enemies he had, what they were capable of doing to harm him, and what they might have done with the young girl whom they had so unscrupulously seized upon in the belief that they had captured the so-called Chevalier de Loupiac in person.

At the same time, Saint-Privat was inclined to believe that he could come to an understanding with Trimoulac. On one condition, however, which was that he should see him before Number 33 intervened.

To treat with an enemy, it is necessary to have some advantage to offer him; and in the present case, what Bonnin had to offer was the secret of the kidnapping business on the night of the 2nd of July.

As long as Trimoulac did not know this secret, the ex-director of the dark room could go to him and boldly say:

"We are hunting the same game, and I have a right to ask for a part of the spoils, for I know something which you don't know. I know where Zenobia's niece went when she reached Paris. I do not know where she now is, but with the information I can give you, you will be in a position to help me to find her. Let us come to an agreement. Sign a contract, and I will give you some information of the utmost importance."

However, on the other hand, if Number 33 had already seen Trimoulac, there was nothing to be done. And it was this surmise which distressed Saint-Privat so keenly. The great point was to be the first in the race.

The old scamp had soon come to this conclusion, even weighing the chances of being cheated by Trimoulac, in whom he necessarily had but little confidence. His conclusion, therefore, was, that he must see Trimoulac without a moment's delay.

"Wait for me here," said he to Cornillon; "I have to go out, and on my return I shall need you immediately."

"I am on duty to-day, sir," replied the detective; "but, no matter, it sha'n't be said that I have left my old master in the lurch."

"I shall pay you well, old fellow, and the work that you will have to do for me will bring you in ten times as much as that which you are doing for the 'house.'"

"Then you are suited, sir," asked the agent; "you are pleased with what I have just been telling you?"

"Why, yes and no. At all events, if by any miracle I do not succeed, it will not be any fault of yours. Stay here. Walk about. Smoke your pipe, if you like. Make yourself at home. I will tell Madame Boutard to send you a bottle of Tavel out here in the

garden. I know that is your favourite wine. She will keep you company till I return."

"Ah! sir," said Cornillon, feelingly—the proposal of the bottle of Tavel made his mouth water—"you have such a way about you that no one can refuse anything you ask. I don't know how it is, but I feel as though I could lay down my life for you."

Saint-Privat, however, did not tarry to hear his old assistant's thanks. He hurried off; and on his way out he gave his orders to the faithful Bourdache, telling him to prevent Cornillon from leaving. Then he hastened to a coach-stand on the Place Saint-Michel.

He calculated that the man who called himself Gardilan had arrived in Paris on the night before, and he conjectured that he had gone straight to the residence of the so-called Baroness de Sainte-Gauburge, whose address Cornillon had stated.

The day was far advanced, and any one but Trimoulac would have had abundant time to set to business after a month's absence. However, Saint-Privat had had an opportunity to study his behaviour and habits in Périgueux, and he knew right well that M. Maxime took his ease as to his duties. He was one of the most cunning and skilful, but also the most sensual and lazy of all Fouché's spies.

So, although it was three o'clock in the afternoon, there was a chance of finding him still breakfasting at his ease, beside the captivating baroness.

Excited by the hope of obtaining a dowry for his dear daughter, Clarisse's aged parent was in great haste to treat with this competitor, so worthy of him, and, after engaging a coach, he bade the driver go as fast as possible.

Twenty minutes after leaving the Rue d'Enfer, he alighted before a handsome new house, and realised by its appearance that M. Trimoulac had not fixed his affections upon any mere grisette.

He naturally asked for the Baroness de Sainte-Gauburge, being well aware that he would be shown out if he undertook to mention any one of the false names assumed by Lacaussade's nephew.

A handsome suite on the second floor was pointed out to him, and, on addressing the smart chambermaid who appeared at the door of the flat, he took good care not to mention Fouché's name by way of introduction. He merely told the maid that he had come from Périgueux with important news for the master of the house, without mentioning that gentleman's name.

This cool way of proceeding proved successful. The girl had nothing to say in objection, but begged him to wait a moment, and presently returned saying that her master was ready to receive the messenger from Périgord.

The die was cast. The two will-seekers were now about to meet openly.

Saint-Privat, delighted by the success of his trick, though somewhat disturbed by the prospect of the decisive interview, followed

the maid, who led him to a small room which was luxuriously, rather than elegantly, furnished. She left him alone there, and he now had time to think of what he should say to his adversary.

Never did a diplomatist need more cunning to treat a delicate question of international policy, and the ex-director of the dark room mentally summoned to his aid all the skill of Talleyrand, whom he venerated, and who at that moment was discussing the interests of France at the Congress of Vienna.

There were two shoals to avoid—too much reserve, which might put the man whose confidence he wished to gain upon his guard; and too much openness, lest he should at once obtain an advantage, by which he would not fail to profit, if that were possible. In a word, the secret of Virginie Lasbaysses's kidnapping must be carefully handled.

While Saint-Privat was preparing his opening words, the door quietly opened, and the so-called Gardilan's waxed moustaches appeared between the scarlet silk hangings.

"I thought so!" exclaimed a mocking voice. "A messenger from Périgueux, that was what Rosette said. I told her that he must have gold spectacles. You see I am right. Come in, sir, come in!"

Bonnin had, indeed, put on his spectacles, as he usually did on great occasions, just as a warrior arms himself for battle.

He willingly followed the individual who so pleasantly received him, and entered a boudoir, where there was a table bearing two cups of hot Mocha coffee, served in Sèvres china.

A row of all sorts of cordials, in flasks of various colours, also stood there, showing that Gardilan had indeed been breakfasting with the Baroness de Sainte-Gauburge.

Saint-Privat thought that she might even be somewhere within hearing, and he began by apologising: "My dear travelling companion—allow me so to call you," he commenced.

"Of course you may do so, as we passed three whole days boxed up together in the same coach," replied the so-called Gardilan.

"I am afraid that I have disturbed you," added the ex-director of the dark room.

"Oh, dear no!"

"But I fancied you were not alone."

"Oh! there was only Zoé here. She is a friend of mine, and you don't disturb me. You have come on business, I can detect that by the way you peer over the tops of your spectacles. Well, we will talk seriously, my worthy sir, as seriously as possible, I promise you, but first of all you must take a little cordial. Which will you have? Rum, Rosolio, Maraschino, or Vespetro?"

"Nothing, thank you, nothing! I never take anything of the kind," answered Saint-Privat, promptly.

"So you do not like sweet drinks. Well, I will give you some old brandy, the very thing for the brave, for you are a brave man, Monsieur Bonnin."

"Ta nks."

"Swallow this, and see if you like it."

Clarisse's father, somewhat surprised by these preliminaries, thought it best, however, to do as his host desired, and made up his mind to taste the drink which Gardilan described as fit tipples for the brave. He, no doubt, was familiar with the old saying: "Claret for boys, port for men, and brandy for heroes."

The ex-director of the dark room, by the way, never did anything without a motive. He saw that his adversary had been taking a little too much at the copious repast provided by Madame de Sainte-Gauburge, and he was willing to help him still further along the same road. He had seen him at table in Périgueux, and knew that his tongue usually wagged fast enough at dessert.

"Well and good!" resumed the amiable traveller. "I see that you are not one of those who are afraid of a glass of brandy; I used to think down there that you knew what good living was, and, indeed, I should have cultivated your acquaintance more if I had thought that we should meet again in Paris. And, by-the-by, my dear sir, tell me how you found out that I was here in the abode of Madame de Sainte-Gauburge, my friend, the descendant of an old Norman family."

This was a direct and unforeseen thrust, and Saint-Privat now saw that Trimoulac was not so intoxicated as he looked. He resolved to reply in such a way as to parry the thrust, for he saw that it was necessary to do so, and he thought it best to go direct to his aim.

"I learned your address," said he, "through one of my friends, who belongs to the police of the realm."

"Ah! ah!" replied Trimoulac, in a tone which spoke volumes.

"Yes, it was so. He has not the honour of knowing you personally, but he has often heard your name mentioned at the 'house,' where you hold a very high position."

"At the 'house'—that is the correct word, and you could not speak better," said Trimoulac, who kept himself on the defensive.

"I hasten to add that this same friend of mine has the greatest admiration for you and your talents," replied Saint-Privat, with a courteous bow.

"I am very much obliged to him. He is certainly a man of taste. But may I ask what reason you had for asking my address?"

"I will tell you, my dear sir, without any preamble, and you will see that I deal openly with you."

"Openly? So much the better! Yes, indeed, that is my own way, especially with smart men like you. So tell me what you desire, as you came here with the obliging intention of so doing."

"I will, indeed, my dear Monsieur Trimoulac," responded the ex-director of the dark room.

"Trimoulac? Good! I see that you did not lose your time down there in Périgord, as you have learned that my name is Trimoulac."

"I had no great merit in making the discovery, for country people are so talkative. And, besides, the nephew of the late Monsieur Lacaussade left a record behind him, although he was so young when he went away."

"Upon my word, now, I shall not attempt to deny it, and I presume that you have already guessed what I went there for."

"I venture to think that I have," said Saint-Privat, with a barely perceptible chuckle. "You went there to talk with a woman named Zenobia Capitaine, whom you suspect of having a will of your uncle's making, and you wished to get it from her, as it disinherits you."

"Better and better!" exclaimed Trimoulac, with a smile. "There's no hiding anything from you; however, my dear friend, just allow me to ask you a question."

"Ten, if you like."

"Good! Another glass to help you to make the answer clear."

"No need of that, sir. My answer will be as clear as crystal," said Saint-Privat, smiling at his own wit.

"I do not doubt it, but I beg of you to take another glass with me. Come, come, accept! If you refuse, I shall not believe in your frankness."

"No matter, I will drink another glass, since you so particularly desire it. There!" and Saint-Privat imbibed another nip of brandy. "Now I am waiting for your question," he added.

"It is a very simple one. I wish to know what you have to do with Zenobia yourself; for, as you may well believe, I know that you went to prison of your own accord. You had yourself arrested, my dear sir, in order to make the sutler's acquaintance. It was not a bad idea, though not a new one, by any means."

"You may as well say that it was a very old one, and, in fact, I never supposed that so able a man as you would be taken in by it. However, it came near succeeding, and if you had not arrived and disturbed me in the court-yard——"

"You confess, then, that you were trying to get round our agreeable friend, Zenobia?"

"I do."

"With what object, pray?"

"To induce her to give me the will that disinherits you," frankly answered the ex-director of the dark room.

"What do you wish to do with it?"

"I'll wager that you can guess."

"That may be," replied Trimoulac; "but I should be glad to hear it from your own lips, my dear sir, and as you are so frank——"

"Well," said Saint-Privat, "I wish to sell it to the person whom it concerns—Monsieur Lucien Bellefond, formerly a lieutenant in the 25th Regiment of the Line, and your uncle's sole heir by this will."

"Very good! We were competitors for this inheritance, I see—I on my own account, and you on that of another person."

"And we are still competitors, my dear sir."

"That may be," growled Trimoulac, frowning slightly. "But in spite of your frankness, my dear travelling companion, a frankness which I admire, I do not very clearly see the aim of your visit to me."

"I wish to inquire whether you are for peace or war," replied Saint-Privat, gravely.

"That is to say, you have come to propose that we shall search for my uncle's will together? Is that your idea?"

"Exactly."

"A will which disinherits me?"

"Oh! entirely."

"Have you read it?"

"No, but I know what it contains."

"You must admit, then, my dear sir, that I have no interest whatever in finding it."

"That is true enough, but on the other hand you have every interest in preventing any other man from finding it."

"Especially if he were disposed to sell it to Monsieur Lucien Bellefond. Eh?"

"That is cleverly reasoned, upon my word."

"Very well, but pray be kind enough to explain to me how you and I, pursuing an opposite aim, can possibly come to an understanding."

"Why, nothing can be more simple. I have no preference, and if I have a reasonable commission I do not care whether I treat with you or with the heir chosen by the colonel."

"This noble indifference does not surprise me on your part," said Maxime Trimoulac; "but as you call this business, tell me, I beg, on what basis does it rest?"

"On what basis?"

"Yes, I wish to know that before replying. One of two things: either I shall make haste to destroy the will, or, on the contrary, you will find it and give it to my rival on being paid for it. There is no room for any bargain in all this, it seems to me."

"I will show you that there is."

"In other words, what have you come to sell me?"

"The will, of course."

"Then you have got the precious document?" said Trimoulac, with unfeigned eagerness.

"Good! he knows nothing," thought Saint-Privat to himself. And then, desirous of profiting by this mistake, the first one that his adversary had made since the commencement of the interview, he quietly replied:

"I will tell you where it is when we have made our bargain."

Trimoulac swallowed a large glass of rum by way of giving himself time to think.

"My dear sir," said he, as he set his glass noisily on the table,

"I appreciate the frankness of your language, and I do not reject the idea of a bargain straight off without examining it; but before concluding one, you must admit that a very great deal remains to be explained by you. You have told me frankly, I admit, how you ascertained my name and address, you have also explained frankly what you have come here for, but there are things which I do not know, and should like to find out. For example, your real name, for, as you must be well aware, I do not believe your story that you are a Monsieur Bonnin, and that you went to Périgueux to attend to a lawsuit."

"Your curiosity is quite natural, my dear sir, and I am ready to satisfy it," replied the ex-director of the dark room.

"I should also like to know the circumstances which put you upon the track of the will and of the colonel's heir Bellefond, whom may the devil fly away with!" exclaimed Maxime.

"Nothing could be more reasonable," observed Saint-Privat. "Let me tell you, then, my dear Monsieur Trimoulac, that I formerly had the honour, like yourself, of serving his excellency the Duke of Otranto."

"Bah! then you belonged to the 'house,' too?" said Trimoulac, with considerable surprise. "How is it that I have never had the honour of meeting you there?"

"Oh, when I belonged to it you were in foreign parts," was the old man's response. "But you have perhaps heard my name, Saint-Privat."

"Saint-Privat? Yes, certainly. Wait a moment while I think! Ah! didn't you leave the political brigade under the Empire?"

"Yes, indeed; in 1808 I was called to other duties. But previous to that I was employed for fifteen years under Cochon, under Rovigo, and under Fouché, and I am a true child of the ring, as the saying goes."

"That is why I have had so much trouble with you for the last two months," said Trimoulac, politely. "Any other man would not have thrown himself in my way three times running, and I sincerely congratulate you, my dear sir. Your make-up as an old soldier was a success."

"Ah! then you remember that little joke?" replied Saint-Privat, pleasantly. "But do you know, my dear colleague, that you tricked me like a schoolboy that day? But for a most miraculous chance, I should have been killed—beaten to death—in the garden of the Tuileries."

"I should have regretted it sincerely, as you may well believe," was Maxime's courteous retort. "But tell me, as we are so confidential now, did you recognise me in the coach on the way to Périgueux?"

"Yes, my dear colleague, I did."

"How?"

"Why, by three little red hairs which you forgot to shave off your

right cheek. You had a dark wig, remember. You see how it was, do you not? There is nothing so treacherous as a mole." And with these words Saint-Privat rubbed his hands gleefully.

"Upon my word, you are right, and I am merely a fool!" exclaimed Trimoulac, putting his hand to his cheek. "We learn something fresh every day, and you are older than I am."

"I'll wager that you recognised me too," now said Saint-Privat with a laugh.

"Oh, yes, indeed! you may be sure of that. I knew you in the morning after breakfast at Orleans."

"I suspected as much, and I must admit that the trick of catching at my glasses was admirably planned and executed."

"Bah! that was a mere nothing," replied Trimoulac. "To tell the truth, I expected something better of the trick that I played you at Limoges when I told the driver that you had gone ahead."

"Ah," muttered Saint-Privat, biting his lips, "then it was to you that I owed that misadventure?"

"Yes," said Trimoulac, modestly. "Well, a man must joke occasionally, you know. But let us return to our subject. You have just told me who you are, and I am disposed to treat you as a colleague, but you have not yet told me how you found out that the will existed, and how you entered into relations with that sweet cousin of mine, Lucien Bellefond."

"I will tell you, my dear Monsieur Trimoulac," replied Saint-Privat, "and in this my frankness will show itself most clearly. I am sure that when you have heard me you will not accuse me of any after-thought. You must know, then, that the functions which I was called upon to fulfil when I left the 'house' during the last years of the Empire enabled me to learn a great many secrets. In point of fact, I was simply the director of the dark room."

"I ought to have guessed it."

"I was dismissed in 1814, but I returned to the same post when Bonaparte came back from the island of Elba, and I kept it till the recent return of the allies."

"I understand now. You must have unsealed a letter from that suttler woman," said Maxime, sagaciously.

"You are right. You see that I keep nothing from you," promptly rejoined Saint-Privat.

"And you at once thought of coming to an understanding with my antagonist. That was not kind, my dear colleague; you ought to have given me the preference," and thereupon Maxime assumed an aggrieved air.

"I did not then know that you were one of us. You had never served under your real name, remember, and it was quite impossible for me to guess that the Chevalier de Loupiac and Maxime Trimoulac were one and the same person."

"Who told you that they were one and the same person?" asked Lucien's cousin, eagerly.

"A man belonging to the 'house,' whom I sometimes employ, the same fellow who gave me your address," answered Saint-Privat.

"He was prowling about the Palais-Royal on the day when I followed you, was he not?" asked the spurious chevalier.

"He was. But he did not tell me about your identity till this morning, when I had occasion to see him."

"And you lost no time in coming here, I see."

"I had none to lose. Lucien Bellefond is warned, and he may get ahead of us," said the ex-director of the dark room.

"I think not," muttered Trimoulac. "However," he resumed aloud, "I know all that I wished to know, and I am ready to hear what more you may have to say. But I must not conceal from you that I know a great deal, and if you have only come to tell me what I already know, I shall decline to bargain with you. My journey to Périgord was not in vain."

"Nor was mine."

"I am willing to believe it, although I am quite sure that Zenobia did not tell you anything of much account."

"Well, in point of fact, she told me nothing at all, but I have made others speak."

"I am listening to you."

Saint-Privat gazed at his friend of the political police with a mocking air, and said laughingly :

"You are playing a cunning part, and I might do the same if I wished. But with this system we should not arrive at anything. I do not perhaps know what you know, but you certainly do not know what I know. If we lose our time in feeling one another's pulse, Lucien Bellefond will have his own way. I would rather generously make the needful advances. When you realise the true value of what I know, you will come to an understanding with me, I am sure of it."

"I do not say no. Go on."

"Well, then, Colonel Lacauassade's will was confided by Zenobia Capitaine to her niece, a young woman or girl named Virginie Lasbaysses !"

"Well, what then?" asked Trimoulac, quietly.

"That young girl repaired to Paris at the end of June. She arrived there—I have proof of that."

"Well, what then?"

"Ah ! ah ! my friend," replied Saint-Privat, with a smile, "I know your game ; but I tell you that it will not serve you with me. I have told you all that I can tell you without committing myself. I have but one word to add, and it is this : Supposing even that you knew what I have just told you, you certainly do not know what became of Virginie Lasbaysses, and that is what I can tell you."

"We have come to it at last," said Maxime Trimoulac. "You say that Zenobia Capitaine's niece has the will in her hands, that she

is now in Paris, that you know where she is, and that you propose to tell me. Is that it, eh?"

"It would be impossible to state the situation more clearly."

"Well, what do you ask for this service?"

"The property left by Colonel Lacaussade is worth two millions of francs, and I want one of them."

"That is clear enough," said Maxime. "But, my dear colleague, a million is a large sum, and before I make up my mind to promise you this amount, I have other questions to ask."

"I am waiting for them," replied Saint-Privat, who was now on the defensive.

"Will you allow me to ask how it is that you have come to propose this bargain to me, when it would be easy for you to conclude as advantageous an arrangement with the other party? If you know where Virginie Lasbaysses is at this present moment, why don't you go to your friend Lucien Bellefond, with whom you agree so well? He would not hesitate to give you a million, for he could not inherit without your help, but I, who am sure of receiving my uncle's money if the will is not found, must naturally have time to reflect over your proposal."

"My reply will be as simple as your question is natural," answered the ex-director of the dark room. "I came to you because, without your help, I cannot carry the affair to a successful termination. You see that I do not try to make myself appear better informed than I really am."

"I don't say the contrary," retorted Maxime Trimoulac, "but if I understood you aright just now, you are simply on the young girl's track, and to find her you need to complete what you already know by what I can tell you."

"That is it, I admit."

"In other words, to ensure success, we two must work together, eh?"

"It is indispensable. If we act apart, we shall not succeed at all," replied Saint-Privat, gravely.

"And to reward you, you think that a million is not too much?" inquired Maxime.

"No, it is not! It is not even half the inheritance, which amounts to more than two millions; and, on the other hand, I bring information that is more important than yours, as it is the starting-point. The sharing of the money is in your favour, although I bring the most needful information."

"Excuse me, my dear colleague," replied Trimoulac, "I am not of your opinion exactly. I even think that my co-operation gives me superior rights to those which you attribute to yourself."

"I should like to know why; but I see how it is. You mistrust me; you are afraid to buy without knowing what you are buying, and before promising, you would be very glad to have some proof of the accuracy of my statements; in a word, you would like me to

give you such details as to this niece of Zenobia Capitaine's, as would enable you to realise that I am really upon her track."

"There's no concealing anything from you, my dear colleague," said Trimoulac, delighted at hearing his adversary make these confidential remarks, and anxious to give him a chance to commit himself.

"Yes," he added, "I should, indeed, be glad to learn something precise from you as to that young person Virginie Lasbaysses. For in order to obtain valuable information from me, it would not suffice for you to say: 'I know what she did when she came to Paris.' You must confess that, unless I were a mere boy, that would be too shallow a trap for me."

There was a pause, and then Trimoulac resumed :

"We both know what we know, but it is you who have come to me. So it is for you to make the first advances if you wish me to give you any information in exchange for your own."

"Upon my word, my dear colleague, there is a pleasure in struggling with a man like you," answered Saint-Privat. "I am used to all this, and I prefer to have you to deal with rather than some stupid mule, the more so as I hope soon to have your assistance. I will therefore frankly indicate my own intentions and renounce one of my advantages by telling you that the young person in whom we are both so much interested came to Paris in masculine attire. I have now raised one corner of the veil."

Thereupon the old boy smiled blandly, with the air of a man who has just gratuitously conferred a boon upon a distressed fellow-creature.

"The corner of the veil you raise is a very little one, my dear friend. I am no better off than before, for I already knew that the damsel was dressed as a man," said Trimoulac, who, although he pretended to attach no importance to this information, had carefully taken note of it.

"The deuce you did!" muttered Saint-Privat; "then it is difficult for me to go any further without giving myself away."

The handsome Maxime twisted his dyed moustaches, and for a moment seemed to be lost in thought. His companion was eyeing him inquisitively, without evincing any inclination to speak.

"Come now, my dear colleague," Fouché's confidential agent at last said, "I do not wish to abuse my advantages, and I should really be sorry to wrest from a clever man such confessions as it would be easy for me to profit by. I prefer to act with the openness that men of our profession ought to show towards one another, and, accordingly, I will demonstrate to you, in a few words, that I have no interest in treating with you."

"It would be difficult for you to prove that, I fancy," replied the ex-director of the dark room, who could not, however, help turning somewhat pale.

"Listen to me," said Trimoulac, interrupting. "You have just

confessed to me that you cannot find this girl unless you have my help."

"And you cannot find her without my help," was Saint-Privat's quick response. "So we are even."

"No, my dear sir, not at all. Our respective situations are very different. If you do not find the sutler's niece, my uncle's will will escape you, and then you will be unarmed. No one will ever purchase what you have not got. But it is the very reverse with me. The disappearance of Virginie Lasbaysses is to my advantage, not to my detriment. I do not need the will that she has with her, as I inherit my uncle's property by the force of circumstances. So I should be a great fool to run after her. Oh! I can guess what you are going to say," added Maxime, seeing that his adversary was about to speak. "You wish to remark that Virginie will not always be out of everybody's sight. At all events, she is lost to you, and you cannot turn the Lacaussade property to account without her. Moreover, if the damsel should appear at any future time, she will certainly not go to you to help her in the fulfilment of the mission which she has undertaken. So I shall not have to make up accounts with you, no matter what may happen."

Saint-Privat turned lividly pale, and bit his lips till the blood came; however, he presently replied with a show of coolness:

"You reason too fast, my dear sir. I will not waste time by remarking to you that it may be after all possible for me to find the girl. No, I prefer to say that you are changing the aspect of the question."

"How is that?"

"Well, the question is not for you to find the will, but to prevent it from being found by another."

"By whom?"

"By the person who is most interested in the matter, that is, Lucien Bellefond, who I think would be glad to take your place."

"Oh, I do not doubt that. My uncle's money would suit him exactly," rejoined Maxime Trimoulac, with a sneer.

"You must admit, then, that there is every probability that Zenobia's niece will eventually come out of her hiding-place to search for her aunt's favourite. I have very good reasons for believing that the two are looking for each other without knowing one another; and I'll wager five francs, if you like, that they will end by meeting."

"And I'll wager that they'll never meet. Come, will you bet a case of rum or a basket of champagne that Bellefond will never see either Zenobia or Virginie, or any of those accursed female relations!"

"My means do not admit of my making so heavy a bet," replied Saint-Privat, modestly, and evincing some surprise. "However, I should very much like to know——"

"Why Bellefond will not see those good-for-nothing creatures?" asked Maxime. "Well, that is my business; but never mind, I am

good-natured, and I will tell you why. Bellefond is no longer to be feared, for he is in prison. He is locked up, my dear sir."

So speaking, Fouché's agent began to rub his hands complacently.

"Locked up?" exclaimed Saint-Privat, who was unable to hide his consternation.

"Yes, and through me," said Maxime, with a chuckle. "I have spoken of him in such a way to the authorities that he is being kept in strictly secret confinement."

"He will not always be kept in prison, though," urged the ex-director of the dark room.

"Oh, it will be for a long time, at all events—a very long time, I'm sure of it."

"May I ask of what he is accused?"

"This fine fellow was arrested, in the first place, for having killed a Prussian officer since the arrival of the allies in Paris; at least so it appears."

"In a duel, of course?" said Saint-Privat, who on hearing this pricked up his ears.

"Yes, in a duel, a duel which took place without any witnesses—a duel that seems to have been something like an assassination," insisted Trimoulac.

"I have heard of that affair through some of our colleagues," said Saint-Privat, "and I believe it to be much less serious than you imagine. Bellefond can easily justify himself. He can prove that he had seconds, and that the fight was fair."

"You take up his defence very warmly, my dear sir," remarked Trimoulac, giving the old man a keen glance.

"I? Not at all. I merely remark——"

"But your remark does not amount to anything, as there is a much more serious charge than that against my cousin Bellefond."

"What is it, may I ask?"

"I might again refuse to answer, but I am quite willing to let you know that he will very soon not only be accused, but proved guilty, of taking part in a downright murder."

"A murder?" repeated Saint-Privat. "That is impossible! Lucien Bellefond is a brave soldier, and quite incapable of committing a crime."

"You have a decided weakness for my opponent," said Maxime Trimoulac, in an ironical tone. "According to you, he possesses every virtue. And noting your manner, I feel more and more surprised that you do not give him the preference in this affair of the will."

"I? Why I hardly know him," protested Saint-Privat. "What I say is a mere inference. I cannot believe, however, that an officer——"

"Has murdered anybody? Your incredulity surprises me, my dear colleague. Such things have happened before, as you must be well aware. For instance, there was Lieutenant Dautun, who cut

his brother in pieces ; and Captain Saint-Clair, who killed the beautiful Dutchwoman. They were not innocent men, I should say. However, don't be uneasy ; the crime committed by your friend Bellefond had a political motive."

"Oh, then, it is different !"

"Not as to the result," rejoined Trimoulac. "The Government does not trifle with conspirators who indulge in such things as these."

"Did Bellefond conspire?" anxiously asked the ex-director of the dark room.

"Yes, he did."

"Against the Bourbons, then, I suppose, and in Bonaparte's behalf, eh?"

"That is less certain. It seems, however, that he and his accomplices wish to overthrow all kings and emperors, and bring back the constitution of 1793."

"Come, come," said Saint-Privat, "all this isn't serious. There are no more Jacobins now."

"You are mistaken, my dear colleague ; and it is easy to see that you no longer belong to the 'house.' If you had remained with us, you would know that the brave *sans-culottes* with whom you were acquainted in your youth have never given up the hope of bringing back the happy times of the year II. Many of these fellows became senators and prefects under the Empire, no doubt. We even know one who is still a minister under Louis XVIII. But the others, those who have had no share in the cake, have never ceased to conspire in secret ; and, indeed, when Bonaparte escaped from the island of Elba, and came back to Paris, they were about to attempt a great stroke."

"And does Lucien Bellefond belong to the gang?" inquired the ex-director of the dark room.

"Certainly !"

"I cannot get over it !" muttered Saint-Privat. "If anybody but you had told me this——"

"You would not have believed it? I see. You must have proof? Well, then, I will give you proof ; and more than enough. You will not say after this, my dear colleague, that I have not done all I could to please you."

"Believe me, I shall not be ungrateful ; but, for pity's sake, tell me what conspiracy the imprudent young fellow has taken part in."

"Imprudent young fellow, indeed ! You really amuse me," exclaimed Maxime Trimoulac. "I must tell you what it is, however. By the way, did you ever hear of the 'Brethren of the Plaster'?"

"Never."

"Nor of the 'Companions of the Trowel'?" urged Colonel Lacaussade's nephew.

"No. What may these brethren and companions be?" asked Saint-Privat, in all simplicity.

"Fellows who propose effecting nothing less than a revolution, and who are thus named because they have a little playful way of walling-up such persons as they wish to get rid of."

"Walling them up?"

"Yes. They place them alive in a hole made in a wall, and then put plaster over them," said Maxime.

"This is perfectly horrible!" ejaculated Saint-Privat.

"Oh, for my own part, I do not know of any expression that is strong enough to characterise such a frightful proceeding. And it is not on the spur of the moment that they do this. They do it advisedly whenever they wish to suppress any one. They seize upon some poor devil and wall him up."

"Where? These abominations cannot take place in any chance spot," said Saint-Privat.

"No, indeed. The gentlemen of the plaster have chosen a locality that suits their proceedings exactly."

"Would it be indiscreet to ask where?"

"Not at all, my dear colleague, not at all," replied Maxime. "I have all the less reason for hiding it, as I mean to deliver all these rascals over to the authorities; and as the trial will be public, all Paris will know what a strange place they chose for their meetings. Just fancy! they meet in the deserted quarries under the height of Montmartre."

"It is not possible."

"Such is the case, as I have the honour to tell you. These vaults are immense, and the bandits enter them by a passage which is known only to the initiated."

"And when they get there they wall up their victims?" asked Saint-Privat, who felt amazed.

"Yes, indeed. The pillars that uphold the vault serve for this purpose; and it seems that if the pillars were opened the bodies of the victims would be found inside them."

"But who do these men treat in this way? I have not heard of any important person disappearing of late," said the ex-director of the dark room.

"Oh, this frightful punishment is meted out to various people, especially spies, and such people as are suspected of watching the association; and also to such members as are accused of betraying the others."

"Upon my word! my dear colleague," exclaimed Saint-Privat, "you have made a discovery that is interesting, indeed, and it will do you great honour at the 'house,' for no doubt you will enable the authorities to find these wretches."

"Yes, indeed," replied Maxime Trimoulac, with a harsh frown on his pale face, "I will deliver them up; and I am only waiting to find them in the very act of meeting in the bowels of the earth. It seems that they meet by torch-light, with masks on their faces. Oh! it is very curious, and the affair will make a great stir."

But, to hide nothing from you, I owe the revelation of this secret to another."

"Some one of us?" queried the ex-director of the dark-room, with an inquisitive air.

"No, no, my dear friend. However, I have nothing to conceal from you, and I will tell you that the 'Companies of the Trowel' were betrayed to me by one of themselves."

Trimoulac paused impressively.

"And do you think that the traitor deserves to be believed?" asked Saint-Privat.

"I am sure of it; and I have already partly verified his assertions. I must tell you, to begin with, that at the time of the first Restoration, the government heard of their goings-on, and I was told to watch them. I had succeeded tolerably well, for I had managed to enter the society, and I was on the point of having all the threads of the conspiracy in my hands, when I was forced to leave France owing to the occurrences of the 20th of March, when, as you remember, Bonaparte returned. After that, unfortunately, I did not renew my connection, except with some subordinate brethren, and I did not know either the leaders or the place where the great meetings took place, or else I should certainly have succeeded in knowing who the chief members were."

"And did you take up the matter again after the return of the allies?"

"No, I did not. I was prevented doing so by other public business, and also by my own private affairs. A certain journey to Périgueux took up a great deal of my time. However, by a piece of good luck, which I had not counted upon, I had scarcely reached Paris when one of the 'Brethren of the Plaster,' whom I had formerly known, came to me and denounced the whole gang."

"And you have not yet sent in your report to his excellency?" asked Saint-Privat, who was all attention.

"To Fouché?" replied Maxime. "Oh! I took good care not to do that for two reasons: the first was that the affair was not yet ripe; some one else might have seized upon it and cut the grass from under my feet. The second reason was that I wished above all things to catch all these rascals together, and with good proofs that would send them direct to the guillotine on the Place de Grève."

"And this, I suppose, is why you have not denounced Bellefond?" asked Saint-Privat.

"Oh! I need not hasten, so far as he is concerned, since I have him under lock and key. He is now arrested, through me, and he will remain in prison long enough for me to find all the elements of a capital accusation against him."

"Oh, indeed!" said Saint-Privat, still feigning incredulity, but visibly bewildered by what he heard.

"This surprises you, I see," said Trimoulac, coolly. "No matter. He has a record that will condemn him to death: conspiracy against

the lawful king, against the safety of the State, and complicity in an assassination. I trust that they will cut off his head—and they will. So do you think now, my dear sir, that I need trouble myself very much about my competitor for my uncle's inheritance?" demanded Maxime Trimoulac, throwing himself back in his chair.

"Ha! ha!" laughed Saint-Privat in his turn; and then assuming an air of profound wisdom, he remarked: "The dead shut out the living, as you are well aware, my dear colleague, and it would suffice to prove that Lucien Bellefond survived Colonel Lacaussade even by an hour's time, and inherited in virtue of a will, for the fortune to escape you. But before I say anything more on that point, I must again express my surprise, yes, my great surprise, that this young man should have anything to do with an assassination. He may have conspired, oh, yes! I am very willing to believe that, but not the rest. It is really too incredible!"

"Well, my dear friend," retorted Maxime Trimoulac, "it is proved with the utmost clearness that your virtuous lieutenant assisted in the walling-up of an individual who had been condemned by the rascals in question. And do you know who they thought they were thus sending to another world. Do you know, eh? Why, your servant, my dear sir, that is, myself!"

"Yourself!"

"Yes, I, Maxime Trimoulac." And seeing the effect he produced, the scamp began to chuckle.

"You must be joking," protested the amazed Saint-Privat; "why, you are here alive."

"Excuse me," rejoined Fouché's confidential agent, "I did not say that they had executed me, but that they thought they had."

"Then some one else perished in your stead?" was the apt retort.

"Exactly."

"Do you know the name of this unfortunate person?" inquired Saint-Privat, as he settled his glasses.

"No, not yet; but I shall know it. All that I can tell you so far is, that I was denounced to the vengeance of the 'Brethren of the Plaster,' and that one night a certain band of cut-throats went noiselessly into a house where it was expected I should be found. My good star protected me, no doubt, for I did not go there. To make up for that, however, they found a person there—in the dark—whom they took for me. They garroted and gagged that person, and finally carried him away and walled him up in one of the pillars of a disused quarry of the Butte Montmartre."

"Great heaven! when did this horrible event take place?" asked Saint-Privat, trying to hide his emotion, which, for various reasons was keen indeed.

"The crime was committed on the first Sunday of last July, at about nine o'clock in the evening," replied Maxime Trimoulac, in all simplicity.

"And they had the audacity to come here, to this house where we now are, to commit such an act of violence?" asked Saint-Privat, in a somewhat incredulous tone of voice.

"Here? What nonsense! Do you think that people would look for me here?" replied Trimoulac. "No, no, I don't compromise my good friend Zoé. No one knows that I have a house in the Rue de la Grange-Batelière, and there was no danger that the 'Brethren of the Plaster' would come here after me. The abduction took place, if you must know the truth, at a pavilion, a mere stopping-place, which I very seldom make use of."

"In the country, I suppose?" said Saint-Privat, in his insinuating way.

"In the suburbs, near the Barrière Rochechouart, on the Chaussée de Clignancourt."

The ex-director of the dark room was now almost wild with delight.

The secret which, in spite of all his diplomacy, he had at first failed to wrest from his adversary, he now knew; it was Maxime Trimoulac himself who had betrayed it without intending to do so.

For there could be no doubt whatever but what Virginie Lasbaysses in person had thrown herself into the lion's mouth, and had been led there by a false letter bearing Lucien Bellefond's signature. To arrive at that conclusion, it was only necessary to compare Cornillon's statements with Trimoulac's revelations.

The young man who had taken the coach just outside Périgueux, and who, according to his own statement, had been going to find his father wounded at Waterloo, was none other than Zenobia Capitaine's niece travelling in male attire. This seeming young man had gone to the little house on the Chaussée de Clignancourt, and had been seized there and carried away by unknown persons.

All this was clearly demonstrated by the facts now known to Clarisse's father. He had known a good deal already, when he entered the house of the Baroness de Sainte-Gauburge, the lady love of Maxime Trimoulac, alias the "Chevalier de Loupiac;" still, he had not then known what he now knew; that is to say, what had been done with the poor innocent girl.

Now, however, he was acquainted with her abductors, since Trimoulac had been imprudent enough to tell him of the crime in which Lucien was supposed to have had a hand.

Virginie had been carried off by the so-called "Brethren of the Plaster," who had believed her to be the spy whom they were looking for, and she had then been dragged into the quarries of the Butte Montmartre, and walled up in one of the pillars inside. And, to all appearance, Colonel Lacaussade's will was still in her pocket.

Saint-Privat had nothing more to learn.

To complete the unexpected stroke of good fortune which had befallen him, placing him upon the track of the precious document,

the possession of which was equivalent to a treasure, Maxime Trimoulac, the heir-at-law, did not as yet suspect that the person who had been executed in his stead was Zenobia's messenger, and had the colonel's will with her.

He knew only a part of the sinister occurrence, of which Saint-Privat on his side, also, knew a part ; and the latter alone was in a condition to profit by his knowledge.

Light having streamed at last upon so much mystery, the jubilant ex-director of the dark room now only desired to shorten his interview with Colonel Lacaussade's heir-at-law, and get out of the house.

He no longer needed to hold out a lure and risk a partial confession to lead on to fresh admissions, or to provoke his companion's revelations by an assumption of seeming frankness.

He had previously desired to advance, whereas he now wished to draw back.

He even feared that he had said too much in speaking of the masculine attire worn by the young girl on her arrival from Périgord. To produce the effect he desired, he must not, however, appear to change his tactics too suddenly. That would never do ; in fact, it might compromise everything.

The admirer of the Baroness de Sainte-Gauburge was still clear-headed, in spite of the number of glassfuls of rum which he had imbibed while he was talking.

Saint-Privat thought the best way to avoid putting him upon his guard would be to delay rising for a while. Indeed, it was preferable to prolong the conversation until he found a chance of going off without seeming over-anxious to depart.

This course was the more advisable, as he wished to obtain some additional information.

For instance, he wanted to make quite sure that his ingenious enemy had not made up this dramatic story just to throw him off the track ; and he also wished to know to what extent his enemy was informed as to the facts he had stated, and what course he meant to follow in reference to the matter.

"This is incredible," he said aloud ; "how will the public ever be made to believe that such atrocious deeds are perpetrated in Paris in the nineteenth century ? I should not believe it myself, my dear sir, if the practice of our profession had not so frequently shown me that reality outstrips the wildest inventions of the romance writer."

"Bah !" exclaimed Maxime Trimoulac, with a sneer. "I have seen worse things than that, and this proceeding on the part of the masons, although it may be somewhat novel and even ingenious, did not greatly surprise me."

"I can understand that," replied Saint-Privat, approvingly. "When a man has managed matters for the 'house' nothing surprises him. For my own part, however, I am somewhat rusty and less accustomed than you are to the rascalities of conspirators. This causes me to be astonished without cause, and I am really afraid you

think me very simple. But tell me, I beg, how you learned all these details? It is simply my love of our profession that leads me to ask you this."

"Why, I have already told you how it was, my dear fellow," said Trimoulac, who was once more sipping some rum; "it was a 'Companion of the Trowel' who came to me of his own accord and told me all the secrets of his accomplices."

"And are you perfectly sure that he was telling the truth?" asked Saint-Privat.

"Perfectly so. I was acquainted with him when I was watching the gang, and I more than once had occasion to convince myself of his goodwill and sincerity."

"Then he has put you in a position to have the whole association arrested? This capture will make your fortune, my dear colleague, and his excellency the Duke of Otranto will not fail to compensate you so generously that you will be able to do without your uncle's money."

So saying Saint-Privat winked and indulged in a quiet chuckle.

"Ta! ta! ta! you go too fast, my good fellow. Fouché is not so liberal as all that, confound him! Besides, you ought to know him—and I do not give up the dear colonel's money by any means. Moreover, the man who told me all this did not tell me the names of these masons. He himself is only an unimportant member, and does not know the leaders. He has never seen the face of the president of these ruffians, the man whom they call the Grand Mason or Master, and he does not know his real name. However, we shall succeed in unmasking them all, you may depend upon it."

"Oh! I do not doubt it," said Saint-Privat, blandly. "A conspiracy, you know, is like a string of beads—when one falls all fall. In the affair of Georges Cadoudal, it was a gun-wad picked up on the cliff at Biville that set the inquiries afoot, and I myself was put upon the track of the inventors of the infernal machine by one of the shoes of the horse which pulled the barrel full of powder."

"It is really delightful to converse with a man of your experience," said Trimoulac, somewhat ironically, as he poured himself out another glass of wine. "Besides, the denouncer in question gave me some precious information in telling me that the meetings of the conspirators were held at the Butte Montmartre, and by showing me the way into their cavern."

"Have you explored the place already?" asked the ex-director of the dark room.

"Not exactly; indeed, I have not had time enough to explore the den, and, on the other hand, it is somewhat dangerous to do so. So I contented myself with going to look at the entrance, and I found it without any great difficulty, although it is very conveniently hidden by the brambles at the foot of the height. I went, however, some way along a dark and narrow passage."

"This is astonishing!" exclaimed Saint-Privat, rubbing his chin.

"I have passed hundreds of times before the height, which serves as the pedestal for the Montmartre mills, and yet I never saw the slightest fissure or passage. I wonder where this famous passage is situated."

"On the esplanade, at the bottom and on the right side of the hill, facing the Chaussée de Clignancourt. But, I say, why do you ask me all that?" suddenly demanded Trimoulac.

"Oh, for nothing," stammered Saint-Privat, somewhat taken aback. "It is mere curiosity on my part."

"Confess that you wish to make sure as to the accusation which hangs over your friend, that precious fool, Lucien Bellefond," said Trimoulac, sniggering.

"Bellefond is not my friend, I assure you," replied the old spy, warmly.

"Whether he is or not, one thing is certain, his fate is settled. That fine half-pay lieutenant is among those whom my informant knows personally."

"Still, that does not prove that he took any part in the execution of the victims," said Saint-Privat.

"Excuse me," retorted Maxime. "I have proof that he was present at the last affair, when my unfortunate substitute became the victim of the masons."

Saint-Privat could not help starting at the thought that Lucien had contributed to the murder of the faithful messenger who had come to Paris to deliver him the will, which entitled him to the colonel's millions.

"Was the informer present at this abominable scene?" he asked.

"He was one of the very brethren who, by the Grand Mason's orders, were to seize me in my little house on the Chaussée de Clignancourt," replied Maxime Trimoulac.

"Then he is as culpable as the rest," said Clarisse's father, "and I should not trust him if I were you."

"Oh, I am not naturally revengeful," rejoined Trimoulac, carelessly waving his hand and all but upsetting his glass of rum. "And, besides, informers are always forgiven; you know that as well as I do, my dear colleague. This precious fellow knows it, too, and he is quite willing to testify when the time comes. Meanwhile, to deprive him of all desire to return to his old friends, I have had him shut up in the prison of La Force, where he is given all sorts of liberties, so as to keep him in the right frame of mind."

"That is a wise precaution, my dear colleague," said Saint-Privat, nodding his head approvingly. "I admire your prudence, and I am beginning to fear that my client, as you call the lieutenant, is in a bad scrape. But excuse me if I ask more. This story is so very interesting that I very naturally desire to hear all the details. Tell me how it is that these fellows mistook some one else for you, when they must have had a description of your person?"

"Yes, indeed," said Trimoulac. "I understand that it seems strange: however, you know that at night-time all cats are grey. The Grand Mason's emissaries saw an individual seated at a table with his back to them, in the very room on the ground-floor where they had expected to find me. It seems that this unknown person was almost as tall as I am, and of much the same figure as myself. Well, those 'Brethren of the Plaster' are quick workers. They fell upon this fellow, upset the light, tied him, gagged him, and finally put him in a sack."

"In a sack?" exclaimed the ex-director of the dark room, opening his eyes in astonishment.

"Yes, indeed! That is their usual method, it seems, at least so my informant tells me."

"And then they carried him away, I suppose?" asked Clarisse's father, somewhat too eagerly.

Trimoulac, however, was well started, and he unsuspectingly resumed his narrative.

"Oh! at once," said he. "The Butte Montmartre is not far off, you see. Two of their accomplices were waiting for them, and were watching at the entrance of the cavern. Of these two sentinels, one was your dear friend, Lucien Bellefond. My informant has sworn to me that he recognised him at once."

"I can't get over it!" exclaimed Saint-Privat, relapsing into his former astonishment.

"What would you say if you knew that the said Bellefond followed the party into the cavern, where the whole band had assembled in solemn council, including the president, who wore a mask over his face and all his insignia, and that the unfortunate fellow in the sack was tried, sentenced, and executed on the spot? Indeed, it was all over in a few minutes. Your lieutenant did not touch the plaster, no doubt, but his presence amply sufficed to make him the accomplice of an assassination, or else I'm very much mistaken."

"That is undeniable, and no court would acquit him," said Saint-Privat. "But one more question, my dear colleague; that will be the last. Have you any idea as to who the poor devil who underwent this frightful punishment could be?"

It was not without considerable hesitation that the ex-director of the dark room asked this momentous question.

The situation had now become an exciting one. A single unguarded word might help Maxime Trimoulac to discover who this unfortunate victim was, and in that case the game would be lost irrevocably.

But, on the other hand, Clarisse's fond parent wished above all things to make quite sure that his adversary had not thought of any connection between the fate of the masons' victim and the disappearance of Zenobia's emissary, Virginie Lasbaysses. Accordingly it was to elucidate this important point that he risked this question, fraught with peril though it was.

"I do not know," answered the so-called Chevalier du Loupiac, without the slightest hesitation. "It might very well have been some one from the 'house' sent to me by my superiors with some urgent communication. I am half inclined to believe it. The authorities were all upset that night, and orders could not be very regularly attended to when the cannon of the allies was booming so loudly. I have since heard that two or three of our agents vanished in the midst of it all. My supposition is therefore plausible."

Saint-Privat drew a long breath. This reply had raised a terrible weight from his heart. All was safe so far.

"Yes, yes, it is evident," he exclaimed.

"Besides," resumed Maxime Trimoulac, "we shall some day know who it was for certain."

"How is that?"

"Yes, certainly," responded Maxime, after sipping his rum again, "when the 'Brethren of the Plaster' are tried, or, for want of anything better, when Lieutenant Lucien Bellefond is tried. For I must tell you that I have a surprise in reserve for my dear cousin, Lucien. He! he! when he is before the court, he will deny everything, of course. Then I shall bring my informer forward, and he will recount the whole scene in the cavern. It will be a perfectly dramatic situation, and you can foresee the result of this evidence. The whole court will repair ceremoniously to the Montmartre quarries. Oh! there'll be a talk all over Paris, I'll answer for that—in fact, all over the world—and the affair will rank among the most celebrated cases on record. My informant has positively sworn to me that he can point out the very pillar in which the victim was walled up. It will be demolished in presence of the magistrates, and the body of the victim will be seen by one and all."

This programme, enunciated in a careless tone, made Saint-Privat start. He was at once a prey to hope and anxiety.

"If I let him go on," thought the former director of the dark room, "he will be disinheriting himself. He does not dream that it was Zenobia's niece who was walled up, and that the will would be found with her body."

Saint-Privat, who was extremely quick-witted, at once added in his own mind: "Trimoulac would then lose the inheritance, which would revert to Lucien Bellefond, but in that case I should lose it too. I cannot let matters follow that course, and I must take proper measures at once."

Thereupon he concluded that he had nothing more to find out from his adversary, and that it was time to go, covering his retreat, however, by some skilful final words.

"Upon my word, my dear colleague," said he, "I am baffled, so far as all this goes, and I cannot do anything with Lucien Bellefond. That is quite certain. But you had a narrow escape, I must say. Every one is exposed to great danger in our profession, still I confess that I never heard the like of this before."

"You speak the truth," answered Fouché's confidential spy. "The devil certainly took good care of me that day. Just fancy my having made an appointment with an English spy, whom I had seen the evening before at Wellington's headquarters, to meet me at my house on the Chaussée de Clignancourt! He let me know in the afternoon that he could not come. That is what saved me. If I had, unluckily, gone to the 'house,' I should have been caught. But I preferred to saunter that evening round the wooden galleries of the Palais-Royal, where I have some acquaintances——"

"Among others, a certain Zulma," said Saint-Privat, with a knowing wink.

"Aha! you remember following me from the post-office, I see! Well, well. I was saying that I went to the Palais-Royal on that famous night of the 2nd of July, and, as good luck never comes singly, I there met your friend Monsieur Lucien Bellefond, who quarrelled with me at the café of the Rotunda, and was even so foolish as to give me his card. Ah! I was deuced glad to get it."

"Then it was you he met," thought Saint-Privat to himself, remembering the scene which he had witnessed at the café while taking his milk posse. He had good cause to recollect Lucien's quarrel with the man who was reading the newspaper.

"And now, my dear colleague," resumed Maxime Trimoulac, with a patronising air, "you know the full value of your friend Lucien Bellefond's claims and prospects, so I hope that we shall resume the conversation where we left off, and that you will make no further difficulty about telling me what you really know as to Zenobia Capitaine's niece, this Virginie Lasbaysses. I am master of the situation—you must admit that—for I have shown you clearly, beyond all doubt whatever, that I can do without you, whereas you cannot do without me."

"You are altogether mistaken. I do not need you," thought Clarisse's father to himself.

"Still, I think," added Madame de Sainte-Gauburge's admirer, "that all trouble deserves remuneration. So, pray finish your confidential communications, tell me all that you have to say, and, if I find anything useful in the information, I shall not refuse a part of the winnings to you. However, I warn you that I shall keep the lion's share, as is the custom on board a pirate ship. I represent the captain, and you the sailors."

"Excuse me, my dear colleague," now said the old man, assuming an air of great simplicity, "I do not think that we shall share anything at all, for, unfortunately, I have nothing more to tell. The fact is—and I'm half ashamed to confess it—I have emptied my bag, as one says."

"Emptied your bag!" exclaimed Trimoulac in astonishment. "Come, come, that is impossible! You began the conversation very promisingly. Think again, and I am sure that you will remember several very interesting things to tell me."

"No, I assure you," meekly replied the ex director of the dark room.

"Come, I will help you," resumed Maxime, who had apparently not yet recovered from his surprise. "Where did we stop? Ah, yes, you were telling me that Virginie had come to Paris in men's clothes."

Trimoulac had now come to the point, indeed. At these words, which showed that he had said too much, Saint-Privat rose a little quicker than was prudent under the circumstances.

"I am afraid that I am taking up too much of your time, my dear colleague," he stammered, "and, in fact, I must really go."

"What! Already?" exclaimed Trimoulac, who was still flurried. "At least let me introduce you to the baroness, my friend Zoé. She will be delighted to make your acquaintance, I am sure."

"Thanks, my dear colleague, a thousand thanks—another time—and now excuse me for having detained you so long," muttered Saint-Privat, making haste to reach the door.

"Virginie walled-up in a pillar in a quarry at Montmartre, the will in Virginie's pockets," he muttered, as he went down the stairs of the house. "I will have that will, I will have it, even if I have to blow up the whole Butte Montmartre to get it. The entrance to the quarry is on the esplanade, eh? on the side of the Chaussée de Clignancourt. Well, well, we'll see." Then the old spy went on his way pondering deeply.

While he was soliloquising, Maxime Trimoulac, who had perforce let him go, muttered: "What an old idiot!" and then began to walk up and down the boudoir.

"The rascal did not come here for nothing, however," he soon resumed. "Why did he go off so suddenly? Why did he become so reticent after talking just like a blind magpie? Can he have obtained any clue from me? What am I to think of his saying that Virginie Lasbaysses came to Paris dressed as a man?"

Then he took another turn up and down the room, still brooding over the situation.

"A thousand devils!" he suddenly exclaimed, angrily stamping his foot. "I had forgotten that I had written to Périgieux to make an appointment with Virginie Lasbaysses at the little house on the Chaussée de Clignancourt. She must have gone there disguised as a man, since she was wearing men's clothes—that old rascal told me so—and it must have been she whom the 'Brethren of the Plaster' walled-up. Ah! confound it, that old villain knows everything now, and he is quite capable of going to remove the girl from the pillar to find the will. Ah! upon my word! I'll prevent that, my dear sir. I'll show you soon what sort of stuff I'm made of!"

Then Trimoulac hastily seated himself and began to devise a new plan.

XIV.

THE home of the banker of the Rue des Bourdonnais was never very gay, but for some days past it had been terribly sad and gloomy.

Monsieur Vernède in terror noticed the 11th of September drawing nigh when that terrible debt, that sum of three hundred thousand francs owing to the Marquis de Baffey, must be paid ; and his daughter, who usually consoled him in all his troubles, did not even attempt to give him courage.

The poor girl was being most cruelly tried. After a month of almost unalloyed happiness—that which had followed upon Lucien's return—the sky had become dark again, and the blast of misfortune was once more shaking the flower of her love.

She had at first been told that her lover would be obliged to go and stay in some retired part of the environs of Paris, and as soon as she received this intimation it had been agreed that she should go with her father to visit him there.

It cost her great pain to cease seeing Lucien daily, but to preserve him from danger she would readily have borne much greater pain than that.

One day, however, Vernède had returned home with a thoughtful brow and a haggard face. Thérèse questioned him as to the cause of his worry, and he avoided replying. But he told her that she must give up for a time the thought of the happy hours which she had hoped to pass with the lieutenant in his suburban hiding-place.

In following this course, the banker bore Lucien's last prayer in mind.

“Do not tell her that I have been arrested.”

Thus had the young man spoken before going off with the gendarmes.

Thomas Vernède had sufficient control over himself to keep the sad truth from his daughter. “Why grieve her so deeply?” he thought. “If Bellefond succeeds in getting out of the grip of the police, it would be better to spare Thérèse an agony of suspense. If he cannot justify and free himself, it would be better that she should remain ignorant of his sentence for ever.”

The banker hoped that his daughter would content herself with the excuses he might invent, and believe that Lucien had voluntarily renounced the pleasure of seeing her rather than lose his liberty. Indeed, this explanation seemed to him quite plausible enough to explain the turn which affairs had taken, for he did not fully estimate the feelings of a loving heart, or that insight

possessed by lovers which enables them to detect all the dangers threatening the beloved one just as they reciprocally guess the most secret thoughts of each other's minds.

Accordingly, it happened that Thérèse was not deceived for a single instant. She at once realised that Lucien must be either in prison or dead, as he again gave no signs of life; and in order to find out what had become of him, she resolved to go and see a friend who had not the same reasons for being silent as her father had.

That friend was our worthy acquaintance, Timoléon Machefer, who, like most old bachelors, was fond of other people's children, and could refuse nothing to the daughter of his old chum Vernède. Besides, he did not agree with all the banker's ideas as to the young girl and her lover.

As regards Lucien's arrest, for instance, the puritanical financier could not admit of any temporising. He would not disarm for a moment, or make any effort to conciliate the authorities, whom he hated with all the force of his Republican prejudices. It was different, however, with Machefer. The provision merchant thought that, however serious the late events might be, something might yet be done to prevent or diminish their sad effects.

His motto was: "Help yourself, and heaven will help you," and instead of subsiding into sadness and resignation, like his friend the banker, he acted with all the native activity and energy he possessed.

He made it his first duty to find out in what prison Lucien was detained, and to inquire what turn his affair was taking.

Machefer, be it remarked, had an excellent reputation as a commercial man, and was greatly esteemed in his neighbourhood, where no one for a moment imagined that he was a conspirator. Being so favourably looked upon, he took courage to present himself at the office of the local commissary of police, without fear of being rudely treated.

He was, indeed, cordially received by the official who had arrested Lucien, and this functionary, who was a good-natured, obliging man, made no difficulty about telling him that the prisoner was at the Conciergerie for the time being, and was only charged with having killed the Prussian major under more or less suspicious circumstances.

This information, favourable as it was, did not set the prudent Machefer's mind at rest; for, knowing that the denunciation had come from Maxime Trimoulac, he foresaw a bitter persecution of Lucien Bellefond, as the latter happened to be the heir of the late Colonel Lacaussade.

The provision dealer did not doubt but what Trimoulac would use all his hidden influence to rid himself for ever of his rival, and, besides, he knew that Trimoulac, whilst calling himself the Chevalier de Loupiac, had spied upon the masons, in view of handing them over to the law.

Therein lay the real danger, and accordingly it was in this direction that Timoléon began his investigations.

He saw several masons whom he knew, and asked them about the rumours that were current.

The society was now scattered, and the conspirators were careful not to show themselves, or take any steps whatever, for fear of provoking harsh measures on the part of the government.

Even the most zealous of the conspirators quietly bided their time, waiting for a summons from the Grand Mason, while many of the others hoped that they would never be called upon to meet their colleagues again.

Machefer spoke with several subordinate members who had better opportunities than himself of knowing how the land lay in the "Rue de Jérusalem," as people then called the police headquarters, and he had the satisfaction of learning that none of them had heard that the police were at work anent the plot which was already several months old.

The government of King Louis XVIII. was at that time very busy with other matters—questions of foreign policy, and so on—and probably it did not wish to notice the past occurrences, unless some denunciation set the blood-hounds of the police upon a new track.

Unfortunately, our friend Machefer was not without apprehensions in that respect. He had spoken to two members who had belonged to the squad which had been appointed to arrest the so-called Chevalier de Loupiac at his hiding-place on the Chaussée de Clignancourt, and these fellows had told him that they suspected one of their colleagues, named Cyrille, of treachery.

This man, who, indeed, had led the squad on the 2nd of July, had been seen, several times, prowling about the Ministry of Police, and talking to suspicious-looking men. A still more serious point was that he was no longer seen in the neighbourhood where he had hitherto resided, and there was a rumour that he had made a fortune and gone off into the country. To those who knew the man, however, this report seemed the height of improbability.

Having obtained this information, Machefer was quite able to reply to the questions asked him by his friend Vernède's daughter, and he did not have the cruelty to refuse to tell her what she wished to know.

In point of fact, he told her all, from the beginning of the fatal adventure into which Lucien had been led. He said that the young man, falling a victim to his own kindness of heart, had been seen by a spy at the moment when he was helping an officer of the royal escort who had been thrown from his horse.

He did not even think it advisable to hide from her the fact that this wounded man was none other than the Marquis de Baffey, Thomas Vernède's creditor, and the rejected suitor to her—Thérèse's—hand.

He finally told her, moreover, that Lucien had been denounced and arrested on the same day as this accident had occurred, and that he had been conveyed forthwith to the Conciergerie, where he was kept in strictly secret confinement. However, he also assured her that he was simply accused of having fought a duel in a coach, and would, no doubt, soon be in a position to clear himself.

Thérèse had never heard of the masons of whom her father was the leader, and this was not the proper moment to reveal to her such a sad and dangerous secret.

Accordingly, Machefer merely hinted that Lucien Bellefond's political opinions might cause him some trouble, and that his imprisonment might last for a long time. He thought it as well to say this, as, in the event of some misfortune, Thérèse would be in a measure prepared to meet it.

He naturally added such consolations as his friendship for the poor girl suggested, and bidding her say nothing of their conversation to Vernède, he promised to make every effort to secure the prisoner's release.

He avoided telling her of the valuable information which he had obtained in Périgueux with regard to Lucien Bellefond's inheritance, for this was hardly his secret; and, besides, he naturally thought that money matters would not interest the young girl when her lover's life was in danger.

Still less did he speak of his anxiety as to the fate of Zenobia Capitaine's niece, the ill-fated Virginie, and the unlooked-for resurrection of the odious Chevalier de Loupiac. Any talk on these subjects would merely have confused Thérèse, who was in complete ignorance respecting them.

However, thanks to Machefer, three days after Lucien's arrest, Thérèse knew a great deal that her father believed her to be unaware of.

Her life now became a terrible one. She was obliged to appear calm whenever her father was present, and she spent most of her time weeping in her own room, whither she retreated to hide her grief. She did not dare to question Machefer anew, when he came at night-time, and talked for hours with her father. Such a course would naturally have roused the banker's suspicions.

Poor Thérèse had a friend, and even a confidant, however, in the person of her young acquaintance, *Æsop*. The provision dealer had, on her account, deprived himself of the services which the little humpback was beginning to render at the shop in the Rue Montmartre, so as to let him remain with her.

So *Æsop* spent long hours upon a stool at the feet of the banker's daughter, and they talked over the past together.

They spoke of that morning when they had experienced such dramatic adventures, when two poor, weak creatures though they were, they had succeeded in freeing Saint-Privat's captive, and they prayed heaven to enable them to release Lucien from his jailers once more.

Unfortunately, the prison of the Conciergerie was less easy of access than the mysterious house in the Rue d'Enfer, and this time they could not devise any means of opening the doors of the prisoner's cell.

Thérèse despaired of succeeding, and even Æsop had but a very faint hope.

He listened attentively to all that the young girl said, and she confidently informed him of every particular of her lover's unfortunate adventure; his meeting with a police spy at the moment when he was helping M. de Baffey, who had fallen from his horse whilst escorting the king's carriage, and his going to the house in the Rue de Varennes, in company with the infamous detective, who had clung to him until they reached the corner of the Rue du Jour.

On the morning of the fourth day the little humpback had an idea. He asked Thérèse's permission to absent himself; and even told her a fib, asserting that Frantz, Machefer's cashier, needed him to make out a list of a large consignment of sardines and herrings.

The young girl granted his request at once.

To tell the truth, she was sadder than usual that day, and had not even courage enough to listen to the consoling remarks of her faithful companion in misfortune.

The boy went away; but, instead of going to the Rue du Jour, he walked towards the Seine.

Where was he going? Thérèse would have wondered had she seen him, but he himself was well acquainted with his purpose—in sooth, a bold one.

The youngster had found out that Lucien would not have been arrested if his generosity had not led him to help an officer of the king's escort—a great nobleman, a marquis—and Æsop, although he had not a very clear idea of what a nobleman might be, thought that if this gentleman interfered Lucien would not remain much longer in prison.

In his childish simplicity, he believed that gratitude was always in proportion to the benefit conferred.

He was not aware that the Marquis de Baffey and the young lieutenant were rivals in love, and this ignorance was fortunate, for he would never have dared to repair to the Rue de Varennes if he had suspected the antagonism which existed between these two men, who seemed so fitted to agree, if not as regards politics, at least on other questions. But unfortunately, as chance would have it, they were rivals in love.

Æsop's fortunate ignorance of the truth had also prevented him from telling Thérèse of his purpose, from which she would assuredly have deterred him.

Still, although he did not doubt but what he would be able to interest the marquis in Lucien Bellefond's misfortunes, he was by no means sure that he would be able to see this high personage.

He scarcely knew where the Rue de Varennes was. He had never

gone through it, and with childish fancy he imagined the abode of the officer of the Black Musketeers must be like the castles in the fairy tales, protected by walls of iron and defended by giants.

Still the courageous though fragile lad did not hesitate for an instant. He had seen his protectress weep, and he could not bear that sight.

In the hope of restoring her to happiness he would, indeed, have braved all the giants in the world, and he had proved as much on the day when he had knocked at the door of the house in the Rue d'Enfer, and fallen into the clutches of Saint-Privat's hireling.

Now, the marquis's house could not be more dreadful than that lair, where the doorkeeper had put out his arms to drag in the person bold enough to knock at the door.

Thus thinking, Æsop went boldly on to the Faubourg Saint-Germain, passed over the Pont-Neuf, followed the quays on the left shore of the Seine, as far as the Rue du Bac, and then, without any difficulty, found the Rue de Varennes.

However, before he reached the house which bore Number 19, he slackened his pace. His difficulties were about to begin.

Even now-a-days it is not easy for a shabbily-dressed lad to get into one of the aristocratic mansions in that quarter of Paris, and in 1815 possibly there were even more difficulties in the way than there are now.

Little Æsop had not even the resource of going in as if to beg, or, what comes to the same thing, to sing those songs which are intended as appeals to the charity of the inhabitants, as is the case in certain parts of Paris. He expected to find the majestic carriage-way closed against him, and he was trying to think of some means of getting in.

However, when he came to the door of the mansion, he was greatly surprised. The portal was even more imposing than he had expected, but it was open, and in front of it, on the foot pavement, there stood a couple well calculated to attract his attention.

One of the pair was a young girl, who had a fine figure, and was stylishly dressed ; the other being a man of unprepossessing appearance. They were both absorbed in looking at what was going on in the courtyard, and it was not difficult to guess that they wished to enter, but did not dare to do so.

After all, however, their behaviour was in no way remarkable, and the humpback might not have noticed them, but for the fact that he at once remembered the face of the man.

It was the same ill-favoured rascal who had seized him by the collar and thrown him into a cellar on the day when, in view of obliging Mademoiselle Vernède, he had courageously knocked at M. Bonnin's door in the Rue d'Enfer.

Now Saint-Privat's hireling possessed one of those faces that are not likely to be forgotten, and poor Æsop positively shuddered as he recognised the scamp.

What had he come there for? Such was the little humpback's first thought, and it was really a very difficult question to answer.

Bourdache had donned his best clothes, and was trying to look like a respectable man, but he did not succeed in this respect. All his efforts to seem above his station had only resulted in giving him the appearance of a subaltern detective.

The lad was not wanting in penetration, and he at first thought that the doorkeeper of the Rue d'Enfer had come to spy upon the house where the Marquis de Baffey resided. However, the presence of the young and handsome woman standing beside Master Bourdache was less easy to account for. She seemed to be on excellent terms with the rascal, and, in fact, they were talking earnestly and confidentially together.

Little *Æsop* was cautious, like all deformed persons. He realised, too, that the couple had not come there for nothing, and so, before taking any definite course, it was advisable that he should learn their purpose.

Instead of straightway confronting the questions and perhaps the repulses of the doorkeeper of this elegant mansion, he began to saunter along, pretending to be searching for something on the ground, in accordance with the usual habit of street Arabs.

His poor clothing, his humble air, and his hump, were all in accordance with the appearance which he wished to assume, and when he boldly stopped near Bourdache, the latter, not recognising him, took him for some rag-picker's child.

Kneeling down near the gutter, *Æsop* seemed to be looking for something in it; but, in point of fact, he did not lose a word of the conversation which was going on between Saint Privat's hireling and the beautiful *Clarisse*.

For it was *Clarisse*—the wayward, romantic damsel—who was now watching the door of the Marquis de Baffey's abode, under the protection of the husband of her father's cook.

"I told you, mademoiselle," said Bourdache, in a surly tone, "that your attempt would not succeed."

"Hold your tongue!" replied *Clarisse*, obstinately. "I will get in even if I stand here till to-morrow."

"But the doorkeeper drove me away, and declared that his master would not—in fact, could not—see any one whatever."

"He lied. His master is much better. He's almost quite well," asserted *Clarisse*. "Papa told me so yesterday."

"Your father, mademoiselle? You had better mention your father, indeed!" said Bourdache, in a grumbling tone. "If he knew what we were doing here, he would send me away to-night."

Clarisse shrugged her shoulders.

"Hold your tongue, I tell you!" she said again, in the same imperative way. "My father will reward you, for he is as anxious as I am that *Lucien* should be set free."

"I know nothing about all that," muttered Bourdache; "but I

know very well that your father has not said a word about all this since he came back from travelling, and that, but for Madame Boutard's wild notions, you would never have taken it into your head to come and ask this Marquis de Baffey to get a pardon for the young officer."

"Madame Boutard behaves better than you do," rejoined Clarisse, in a firm tone. "She knows that I love Lucien Bellefond, and so she told me how to rescue him."

The romantic damsel, imbued with the far-fetched ideas of the time, fancied herself to be the heroine of her favourite romance, Madame Cotin's wonderful story, "Mathilde and Malek Adel." She was the tender and valiant Mathilde, and Lucien, of course, was the young Saracen warrior, pining in captivity.

"This is a pretty way, indeed, to rescue any one," said Bourdache; and he added sagaciously: "You do not know anything about your father's plans, and you may be upsetting them all. A thousand thunders! what a fool I must be to have let you coax me into coming here!"

"You have said enough," replied Bonnin's wilful heiress. "My father's plans are nothing to me, any more than that dowry which I have heard so much about, though I believe it is merely a myth."

Bourdache was about to reply, when the damsel clutched hold of his arm and pointed to the courtyard.

Two grooms were to be seen rubbing down a superb horse, and in the middle of the court a fine landau had now stopped, coming from the coach-house, and driven by a coachman in full livery.

Moreover, an old lady, escorted by two maids, was coming slowly down the steps of the mansion, no doubt with the intention of entering the showy vehicle.

This noble dame had a lofty air, in spite of her advanced age and old-fashioned dress. She indeed looked a little like the famous Madame de Maintenon.

"It is his aunt, I must speak to her," said Mademoiselle Clarisse impulsively.

Thereupon she darted into the courtyard without paying any heed to the doorkeeper, who, as he rushed out of his lodge to stop her, was only able to pounce upon Bourdache, whom he seized by the collar.

Æsop, who had heard all the talk, took advantage of this chance to slip into the yard and hide in a corner.

Meanwhile, Clarisse's bold conduct had already attracted the attention of the old lady, who stopped short, asking in a broken voice:

"What is it? what is it?"

And the question was natural on the part of this stately dowager, for the courtyard at that moment presented a most unusual appearance. A young girl of peculiar demeanour, running in and passing the doorkeeper, despite the latter's prohibition; a man of low

appearance, whom the said doorkeeper had seized by the collar; and a little beggar boy slipping between their legs to hide in a corner.

It was Clarisse who undertook to reply to the venerable dame's eager inquiry.

"Madame," said she, "are you not the Countess des Orgeries?"

The old lady, thus boldly accosted, drew herself up, and leaning upon her crutch-stick, looked fixedly at the damsel ere she coolly replied:

"What do *you* wish with the Countess des Orgeries?"

"I have a favour to ask of her," stammered Clarisse, who was utterly disconcerted.

"Very well; we will see to that presently; but let me tell you first of all, my lass, that a woman of my age and rank is not to be approached in this way."

Having thus spoken, the aged dame stiffened herself in her most imposing fashion.

"Pardon me, madame," responded M. Bonnin's heiress, "I asked your doorkeeper to let me see you indoors, but he refused to let me in."

"He did quite right. Who is that disreputable fellow who is struggling with him now?"

"He is my father's secretary."

"Your father has nice-looking secretaries, I must say!" said the countess. "That man looks like some convict escaped from the king's galleys. A nice secretary he must be!"

Then, calling out to the doorkeeper, she added: "Picard, put that fellow out into the street!"

This was already half accomplished, for Bourdache was no longer young, and, although strongly built, he was no match for the countess's retainer.

"Now, my beauty," quietly resumed Madame des Orgeries, taking a huge pinch of snuff from a very fine box, "I will listen to what you may have to say. I have no prejudices, mind; I belong to the school of Jean Jacques Rousseau, who used to come to see me dressed as an American, when he lived at Ermenonville, and I think that all men are equal. You are of low origin, that is quite evident, and there was an Orgeries at the First Crusade, but I do not pride myself upon my birth, and, in proof of that, I am now listening to you."

Far from encouraging Saint-Privat's daughter, this strange discourse completely confused her.

Clarisse was accustomed to do much as she liked in the Rue d'Enfer, and although now and then she had a tiff with her father and had to obey his behests, yet, as a general rule, she scouted all authority, as her duenna, the ex-goddess of reason, was well aware. Moreover, the romantic damsel had never previously been addressed by any one in the way that the dowager now spoke to her, and as she did not appreciate the prowess which the countess's ancestors had

displayed in Palestine, she was strongly tempted to give an impertinent answer. But, on the other hand, the old lady's manner awed her, let her think as she might, and thus her usually fluent tongue was paralysed.

Besides, she had come to ask a favour, so that this was certainly not the time to quarrel.

Her embarrassment finally touched Madame des Orgeries, who resumed in a more gentle way :

"Come, my dear, just explain yourself, and be brief. I am expected at the Baroness de Boisseant's card party."

"Well, madame," said Clarisse, in a faint voice, "I have come to ask you to use your influence to have a brave officer set at liberty."

"An officer? Ah! Ah! I'll venture to say that he served the Corsican ogre."

"He is, or rather he was, a lieutenant in the 25th Regiment of the Line. He resigned, however——"

"When the king returned, eh? I was sure of it. He has been imprisoned for conspiring against the legitimate government, I suppose? Just like all these Jacobins!"

"No, madame; it is for having killed a Prussian officer in a duel," answered Clarisse.

On hearing this the countess perceptibly changed in her manner.

"Ah! that is different," said she, "I hate the Prussians. Their great Frederick was merely a pretentious soldier, although he was so very intimate with my friend Monsieur de Voltaire, and if your lieutenant only has that little matter on his conscience——"

"I assure you that is all, madame."

"Very well; but why are you so greatly interested in this brigand of the Loire, for that is the right name for all Bonaparte's men."

"Because I wish to marry him," replied Clarisse, without the slightest hesitation.

"That is a good reason, my girl, a very good reason, indeed, from your point of view, and I am glad that you speak out so plainly, but, as I myself am not in love with this fine soldier—I am past all that, and besides, I couldn't be in love with a commoner—why should I use my influence in his behalf?"

"Because he saved your nephew's life, madame," answered Clarisse, warmly. She had now recovered all her compromise.

"How was that?"

"Yes, madame; your nephew, the Marquis de Baffey, fell from his horse, and would have died on the spot had not Monsieur Lucien Bellefond, the officer in question, raised him up from the ground and brought him home here."

"Aha! I see! But tell me, my dear, how came you to know of what had happened to my nephew, the marquis?"

"My father told me."

"And he sent you here as an ambassadress, I presume?"

"No, madame, not at all ; he is not even aware of what I am now doing."

"So you came on your own responsibility. That's not bad for a tradesman's daughter. I suppose your father is a tradesman?"

"I don't know," stammered the daughter of the ex-director of the dark room. She was only vaguely acquainted with her father's avocation and standing.

"No matter. I see no harm in a marriage between a girl of your class and an officer who has served the Corsican ogre. It is a very suitable kind of match," said the dowager, with a patronising air.

"Then, madame, may I hope——"

"You may, my child, you may," said the old lady in her patronising way. "I should already have rewarded the man who did Henri this service—Henri is my nephew, and he is quite well now; but he always told me that he did not know who it was that had helped him up. Now that I know the name, however, I will speak to Fouché about the matter, and he will not refuse my request, especially as he has just married into our set, and is trying to get into favour there, so that his impious vote at the National Convention may be forgotten."

"Oh, how good you are, madame !" exclaimed Clarisse, rapturously—she indeed felt inclined to spring at the old lady's neck to kiss her—"and how glad I should be to bring my father here to thank you !"

"I can dispense with that," replied the countess, abruptly. "Good-bye, my girl."

Thereupon she made a peremptory gesture, which signified that the interview was over, and which put an end to all Mademoiselle Bonnin's expressions of gratitude. Next, as soon as the old dame had got into her carriage, with an agility unusual at her age, the equipage left the court at a fast trot ; and finally, Clarisse ran back to Bourdache, who was walking up and down the Rue de Varennes grumbling like a bear. In the first place, the doorkeeper's violence had hurt his feelings ; and secondly, he did not at all approve of the step which Clarisse had taken.

During this singular conversation between the aristocratic dowager and the spy's daughter, the poor lame boy had remained crouching near the wall inside the yard.

He would have been glad to put in his own plea for Lucien, and if he did not throw himself at the dowager's feet, it was in a measure because he saw that the young girl was pleading the lieutenant's cause. Moreover, Madame des Orgeries' lofty manner had intimidated him to such a degree that he did not dare to stir, and then again, he realised that this handsome girl had an interest in the matter that was opposed to that of Thérèse Vernède.

The little humpback did not know Clarisse ; but having seen her with the man who had so roughly seized hold of him at the door of the house in the Rue d'Enfer, he felt mistrustful respecting her.

His prudence did not advance his own affairs, however, as he had not seen the marquis ; and, in fact, he had little chance of seeing him. He did not even know whether M. de Baffey was in the house.

He began to ask himself whether he would not do as well to go off and renew his attempt on the morrow, when, unfortunately, one of the grooms who was rubbing down the horse saw him, and after abusing him, called to the doorkeeper to put him out. The other groom even flung a stone at him, but fortunately missed his aim.

So Æsop, seeing that all was over for that day, was about to turn and leave, when suddenly at the door of the house he espied a tall and handsome man, who was wearing a dressing-gown, and had his head bandaged up.

The poor humpback at once realised that heaven was helping him by sending M. de Baffey there. Now was the time, or never.

Æsop did not hesitate. Stopping short, he took off his cap, looking so entreatingly at the marquis, that the latter beckoned to him to come near.

"What do you wish with me, my boy ?" said he, pleasantly, as soon as the humpback reached the foot of the steps.

"I wish to ask you to have Lieutenant Bellefond pardoned, sir," answered little Æsop.

"Lieutenant Bellefond, indeed ?" rejoined the marquis, with unfeigned astonishment. "Did he send you here ?"

"No, sir, he didn't, but I came because he is in prison for having fought a duel."

"That is very strange !" muttered Henri de Baffey, and then he resumed aloud : "But some one must have sent you ? You surely didn't come of your own accord ? What can you have to do with Lieutenant Bellefond ?"

The humpback reflected for a moment, and finally he deemed it advisable to tell a falsehood. The end justified the means in this case.

"I came from a young lady who is going to marry Monsieur Bellefond," he timidly replied.

"Mademoiselle Vernède ?"

"Yes, sir ; that is her name."

"And you say that she sent you to ask me to plead for Monsieur Bellefond ?" inquired the marquis.

"Yes, sir ; I came from the Rue des Bourdonnais."

Henri de Baffey was greatly agitated, and although he said nothing, his eyes sparkled so strangely that poor Æsop drew back.

"Go and tell Mademoiselle Vernède that I have received her message, and that in three days' time I will bring her my answer," at last said the marquis.

The humpback realised that he was dismissed, and, without knowing whether he ought to rejoice or mourn, he bowed very low, and then, without more ado, ran off into the street,

XV.

THAT same day, while Æsop and buxom Clarisse were thus interceding for Lucien Bellefond with very different motives, our dear friend Saint-Privat suddenly fell like a bombshell into his snug retreat in the Rue d'Enfer.

He had made an appointment there with his faithful subordinate, the wary Cornillon, whom, for obvious reasons, he did not wish to receive at his house in the Rue des Moineaux.

He found him strolling about the grounds, smoking his pipe to while away the time, and, to his great surprise, he learned from his housekeeper and acolyte, the once beauteous Madame Boutard, that his dearly-cherished daughter had gone out an hour before with that scamp Bourdache, and had not said where she was going.

This escapade was calculated to alarm the ex-director of the dark room, for being well aware of his daughter's romantic proclivities, he keenly suspected that her absence had something to do with the handsome lieutenant, whose unfinished portrait was such a conspicuous object in the pavilion studio.

Like Calypso, who could not console herself for the departure of Ulysses, the buxom but susceptible Mademoiselle Bonnin had not known a moment's happiness since her dear invalid had so suddenly departed for an unknown destination.

Her father's varied explanations, compounded of commonplace fibs, with just the faintest sprinkling of veracity, had by no means satisfied her inquisitive mind and yearning heart, and during the old man's absence the majestic governess had had a great deal of trouble with her self-willed pupil.

The deserted young lady complained bitterly of her lonely surroundings, and even of her fond but reserved father. She declared that the whole household was deceiving her, and hiding from her what had really become of that handsome Monsieur Bellefond, whose abode she at least would have liked to know.

To tell the truth, the romantic Clarisse would not believe that the young ex-officer was insensible to her majestic charms, or that he had considered it quite a deliverance to leave the hospitable abode where he had been so carefully and affectionately tended.

Our ambitious acquaintance, Saint-Privat, had had neither the time nor the inclination to explain all this before starting on his journey to Périgueux, and the divine Julie vainly declared that the young man had left in accordance with all the most approved rules of society and propriety, adding that he would certainly reappear

when her father did. Clarisse would not listen to all this. She scouted it, indeed, as the height of improbability, and after a series of unpleasant scenes, threatened to take some bold step herself.

Fortunately, Madame Boutard, who made up for her lack of authority by an artfulness which would have done credit to a diplomatist, succeeded in quieting the strong-willed girl till Saint-Privat's return. But alas ! the ex-director of the dark room merely brought back some promises to his daughter, promises which he certainly did not hesitate to make, saying that he would soon bring Lucien to her, and that he would even speedily lead her to the altar ; however, he still avoided telling her anything with regard to the sudden disappearance and present whereabouts of the handsome officer.

The inflammable Clarisse, who had inherited a fair share of the parental cunning, pretended to believe all this ; and thus her father was greatly surprised when he heard that she had gone out that morning and taken that watch-dog, Bourdache, with her.

However, he knew very well how to conceal his feelings whenever anything serious was the matter, and he was now extremely anxious to have a chat with Cornillon.

He thought to himself that Clarisse would scarcely do anything imprudent, the more so as Bourdache was with her ; and, after all, it might be that she had merely gone out for some harmless purpose, and would soon return.

After easing his feelings by lecturing everybody, including the governess, who took his remonstrances in very good part, our wary friend went to join Cornillon in the garden.

Saint-Privat had not had time to see his acolyte again on the same day as he interviewed Maxime Trimoulac with such decisive results, for the visit to the Rue de la Grange-Batelière had lasted a long time, and, as Cornillon had had to attend to his duties in the Rue de Jérusalem, he had left the Rue d'Enfer, despite Bourdache's opposition.

Saint-Privat was now very anxious to consult him as to what he ought to do ; and, indeed, it was now very evident that matters must speedily be brought to a termination.

"Well !" called the ex-director of the dark room, as soon as he caught sight of his assistant, "you know that there are fine goings-on here ?"

The detective rose up, took his pipe from his mouth, made a kind of military salute, and then said, respectfully :

"I have heard that the young lady has gone out without permission."

"Yes, indeed ! Can you understand such behaviour as that, Cornillon ?" exclaimed the tender father, raising his hands to heaven ; "a child for whom I have sacrificed everything, for whom I have denied myself so much—the apple of my eye, the one thought of my life ! Dear me ! Dear me ! Ah ! how ungrateful children are !"

"Don't be put out, sir," said Cornillon, by way of setting his patron's mind at rest. "She must have gone to the Luxembourg to take the air."

"Not with Bourdache, surely? Why should she go with him to the promenade?"

"It is true that Bourdache does not look much like a lady's companion," replied the detective, with a sneer. "Who knows, however? She may be running after the officer."

"Impossible! She plagued me so much with questions about him, that yesterday, to make her keep quiet, I told her that he was in prison, and that I hoped to get him set free very shortly."

"And is that all she knows about it?" asked Cornillon, who seemed struck by this reply.

"Yes, unless Julie has told her anything else," answered Saint-Privat, somewhat testily.

"I remember that Madame Boutard was there the other day when I was telling you the story about the meeting between the Marquis de Baffey and the lieutenant, the former's accident and the latter's arrest. I learned all that at the 'house,' you know."

"Well, Julie declares to me that she told her nothing, but I doubt it. Ah! what a nuisance the women are! Let us leave all that, however. I have serious anxieties on another subject, and I wish to consult you. Do you know where Zenobia's niece is?"

"You told me something the other day about her, but you did not tell me much," replied Cornillon, pulling at his pipe with a phlegmatic air.

"That was no fault of mine. You were in a great hurry. Fortunately, we can talk at our ease to-day. And, indeed, I have a lot to tell you about this affair."

"Oh, yes! we have plenty of time; I have got three days' leave, and you can do as you like with me, sir. Happy I am to serve you."

"Thanks; I will keep you with me; but let me begin. At the interview I had with Trimoulac in the Rue de la Grange-Batelière, the fool let the cat out of the bag without suspecting it. It was he who unwittingly put me on poor Virginie's track. It was she who was kidnapped at the house on the Chaussée de Clignancourt—kidnapped by Freemasons—taken into a deserted quarry at Montmartre—and there walled up alive in a pillar supporting the vault."

"The deuce take me if I ever should have thought of such a thing!" exclaimed Cornillon. "It was a strange idea to wall up a woman alive! Who ever heard of such doings?"

"We hear something new every day. It is, however, vexatious that the colonel's will should have been buried with her; for such I really believe to be the case," said Saint-Privat.

"And it must be so, as she brought this will to Paris with her, and did not give it to any one—at least, we have no knowledge of her having done so. This will must be somewhere, that's clear."

"Of course ; and do you think that I ought to give up all hope of securing it ?" asked the ex-director of the dark room.

"No, certainly not. At least I, if I had the hope of making a fortune, would hunt for this will even in the sea itself sooner than renounce the hope of obtaining it."

"It is much easier to talk about it than to do it," muttered Saint-Privat, sagaciously. He was in a thoughtful mood.

"That may be ; but we can try," replied Cornillon. "It would be absurd to let the thing go without making an effort."

"It is my intention to have a try, especially as other people may have the same intention."

Cornillon looked up in some surprise. He had never dreamt of this contingency.

"Who do you mean ?" he asked.

"Trimoulac, in the first place."

"Why, I thought that he did not know the great secret. I imagined—of course I may be mistaken—still the inference I drew from your words was that he did not suspect that the man who was walled up at Montmartre on the 2nd July and the sutler's niece were one and the same person."

"He certainly did not appear to suspect this while I was talking with him," replied Saint-Privat, "but he is a very cunning fellow—of that there can be no doubt—and after I left him, he may have remembered something which I imprudently let out."

"What was that ?"

"That Virginie Lasbaysses came to Paris attired as a young man," answered the old spy, with a grimace implying self-dissatisfaction.

"The devil ! he may think of it. That's certain," rejoined Cornillon, with a gesture of alarm.

"And with the influence that he possesses with Fouché, he has a thousand ways of obtaining whatever information he may want. He will make inquiries, and if he finds out the truth, he will lose no time in acting."

"I agree with you so far as that goes, but we can get ahead of him," answered Cornillon, promptly.

Saint-Privat was about to say something else when, on looking up in an abstracted way, he suddenly caught sight of Clarisse coming down the gravel-walk.

His presumptive heiress ran forward ; her blooming cheeks and her bright eyes seemingly indicated that she had some important and pleasant news to tell.

Bourdache followed in the rear, but without evincing any alacrity. Indeed, he looked like a dog who has stolen his master's dinner and expects to be beaten for doing so.

"He will soon be pardoned !" called out Mademoiselle Bonnin, without any other preamble, when she was still a dozen paces distant from her father.

"Whom are you talking about?" demanded Saint-Privat, knitting his brows.

"Why, Lucien of course," answered the wilful damsel. "Madame Boutard told me that he had saved the life of an important person, and——"

"Madame Boutard knows more than I do, then," replied the old spy, with a gesture of suppressed rage; "but she is a fool, and she will soon hear from me."

"You may do as you like," replied Clarisse, disrespectfully; "but you cannot prevent the fact that the Countess des Orgeries, who is received at court, will speedily set her nephew's saviour at liberty."

"Oh, women, women!" growled the old man, stamping with rage. These tidings, indeed, were altogether too much for him.

In fact, becoming quite infuriated, he cried, in a loud tone:

"This is all very well, but I cannot talk with you now, and I wish you to go to your room and remain there till I call you."

"I am no longer of an age to be sent to my room like a child," replied the young lady with a savage glow in her eyes, and a still more heightened colour in her cheeks. "All the same, however, I don't care, now that I am sure of seeing Lucien again."

Thereupon, turning her back upon her father, she sauntered leisurely towards the house.

"Go into your hole, now!" called out Saint-Privat, addressing Bourdache, and shaking his fist at him. The miserable hireling had in the meanwhile stood there with an uneasy, hang-dog expression of countenance.

Without a word the doorkeeper turned on his heels, and still hanging his head, betook himself off to his quarters.

"Well," said the detective to his employer, as soon as the others had gone, "you may believe me or not, but I thought that this would happen. Ah! it's a great pity, but young people have such a way of their own! Your young lady learnt all this about Monsieur de Baffey from Madame Boutard, and, being in love with the lieutenant, she went direct to Baffey to ask him to help her lover."

"And that fool of a marquis promised to do as she asked! Well, what do you say to that?" said Saint-Privat.

"I should say that it is yet another reason for your making haste to find the will."

"And that is what I want to do. Ah! if wishing were all that were required, I——"

"We must act."

"Act! How?"

"It is very simple. The girl and the will are in one of the quarries at the Butte Montmartre, are they not? I understood you to say so, at all events."

"Yes. At least, so Trimoulac said."

"It must be true, for he had no interest in lying at the time," remarked Cornillon, sagaciously.

"It is at all events probable. But even if it is all correct, I don't see that it helps me."

"Why not? Come, sir, a quick-witted man like you must see the advantage. That scamp Trimoulac told you what you did not know before in spite of the trouble you had taken. You have been searching for two months, searching in vain for a treasure, and now that ass has told you where it is."

"He did not tell me how to get at it."

"Really, sir, you could hardly expect him to tell you how to rob himself," said the facetious Cornillon, with a touch of irony which was natural enough under the circumstances. "Besides, between ourselves, it seems to me that he has told you quite enough to enable you to supplant him."

"I do not see that he has," muttered Saint-Privat, who quite failed to understand what his acolyte was aiming at.

"Well, sir, did he tell you where the entrance to the famous quarry was?" asked Cornillon, after a moment's reflection.

"Yes," replied the ex-director of the dark room. "He said that it was possible to get into it, on the right side of the height, near the Chaussée de Clignancourt. The passage is hidden by some brambles, he stated."

"Those brambles will not prevent you from finding it," remarked the subordinate spy. "So nothing can be easier than to enter the cavern where the treasure is."

"Easier! I don't see that."

"Good heavens, sir, I don't understand you! Come, come, you were much more sagacious when there were no millions to find. Why, didn't that good Chevalier de Loupiac also let out that the victim of the masons was walled up in one of the pillars that hold up the vault of the cavern?"

Cornillon paused again, fully expecting that his worthy patron would now grasp his meaning and reply accordingly.

But Saint-Privat's answer was most disappointing.

"He did not tell me which one," said he.

"That would have been asking too much," was Cornillon's prompt retort, "especially as he does not know which one himself—at least in all probability he doesn't. But this ought not to hinder you. There are not so many pillars, I presume, to puzzle one. Besides, a body takes up a deal of room, and the masonry over the orifice cannot yet be dry. You could easily find the place."

"Well, what then?" demanded Clarisse's father, speaking with evident hesitation.

"Why, you can handle a pickaxe, can't you, sir. The plaster will yield easily enough, and you will soon disclose the body. The rest is nothing; you must search the victim's pockets till you find the paper. It will be in one of them, sure enough!"

"It is a horrible task," replied Saint-Privat, who could not help shuddering at the idea of the scheme which his acolyte had propounded.

"Pah! a million is not to be got without a little trouble, any more than an omelet can be made without breaking the eggs." And thereupon Cornillon quietly chuckled at his own wit.

"Then you think that we must go and dig the will out?" asked the ex-director of the dark room.

"I do not see any other way, unless you expect the will to come to you. And that it can't do. Remember what Mahomet said, sir, 'If the mountain won't come to me, I must go to the mountain.' And even as it is, you must make haste over the job."

"Oh! a will in a dead woman's pocket cannot fly away," replied Saint-Privat.

"No, but it may be taken away before you get there, as you yourself suggested only just now."

"Yes, by Trimoulac. I'm aware of that," said the ex-director of the dark room, with a sigh.

"By Trimoulac, certainly. You let out the secret of the niece's disguise. That was enough, I'm sure of it—I know him: he is extremely cunning. He will compare his information with what you revealed to him, and will soon draw the conclusion that you spoke of just now. Now the chevalier isn't merely quick-witted; he is also a man of quick action, and as soon as he comes to the said conclusion he will set to work, I'll wager. And mark this, he will hasten all the more because he knows you to be a competitor of his. He knows that you are looking for his uncle's will to sell it to some one else; you told him so yourself—or, at all events, you said something of the kind."

Saint-Privat sat there with a crestfallen expression of countenance. He had abundant cause for feeling dissatisfied.

"I begin to think that I said too much," he said, after a short pause, which he spent in meditation.

"He was able to see that you are a man of ability," resumed Cornillon; "he knows, too, that you are a man to understand a mere hint, and he will have realised that the story of the quarry did not pass unobserved by you. Consequently his conclusions will be that you will try to turn that story to account, and with that idea in his head, he will not let you outstrip him."

"All this is only too likely."

"And if Lucien Bellefond should hear of all this, he would be one adversary the more," remarked Cornillon, who seemed to be unusually sagacious that day.

"It is impossible that he should ever hear of it," protested Saint-Privat. "Who could tell him of the fate of Virginie Lasbaysses?"

"Her Aunt Zenobia, of course; at least she can say that Virginie is dead. I am even surprised that she has not done so already."

It is true that she does not know Bellefond's address, but she may find it out any day."

"She does not know how to write."

"She can find some one to write for her, or she can come to Paris herself. Do not delay matters, sir. I assure you, by all that's holy, that you have not a moment to lose, if you do not wish to lose the will."

Saint-Privat felt all the force of his assistant's reasoning, and hung his head as if overwhelmed by the weight of the situation. He indeed found himself in a peculiarly trying position. The precious will now seemed so near and yet so far. This arch intriguer had a dread of violence, and it had occurred to him that if he ventured into that old quarry of Montmartre, among the bats and reptiles that possibly dwelt therein, he might be pounced upon by those mysterious Brethren of the Trowel, tied up in a sack, and treated to the same fate as Zenobia Capitaine's luckless messenger. This prospect filled him with horror. And yet, on the other hand, his longing to obtain possession of the will was more acute than ever; so acute, indeed, that at last he partially overcame his fears.

"It is impossible for me to accomplish this thing alone," he muttered.

"We can both undertake the job if you like," said Cornillon, setting aside his pipe, which he had finished smoking during Saint-Privat's meditation.

"Would you really consent——"

"To help you? Of course I would! I never shrink from work," replied the detective, with alacrity.

"Well, my old friend," answered Saint-Privat, with a faint show of something approaching emotion, "I will accept your offer."

"You are right, sir! I am glad you have come to that decision. Something tells me that we shall succeed if we do not delay too long."

"Be tranquil. I am as eager as you are," said Saint-Privat, visibly brightened by the prospect of having Cornillon's assistance. "When shall we begin?"

"When, master? Why not to-night?" was the subordinate's ready reply.

"To-night, then. But tell me, what is your idea as to how we ought to begin."

"Well, as to that, I will go this afternoon and walk about the Butte near the entrance, which I might have some little trouble in finding by night. When I've ascertained the position of the entrance, I will supply myself with the necessary tools, some pick-axes, shovels, and dark-lanterns. You may leave all that to me. I know all about such things, and I can promise you that proper implements will be chosen."

"Very well. Where shall we meet?" asked the ex-director of the dark room, after nodding his approval.

"On the esplanade at the foot of the Butte Montmatre. That's the best place, I fancy."

"At what time?"

"At ten exactly. We should, otherwise, be exposed to meeting people near the entrance; and if we wait till it grows later we might not have time to finish our work before daylight. I hope that it won't be a difficult job; still, there's no telling, and we must look out for all contingencies."

"I agree with you. But suppose we find any one inside the cavern," said Saint-Privat, slowly; and at this suggestion, although he himself made it, he could not control a nervous shudder.

"Any of the masons? There is no danger of that, sir," promptly replied Cornillon, shaking his head. "You yourself have stated that the chevalier says they no longer go there, knowing they are betrayed."

"But what of the chevalier himself? What if he has had the same idea as we have, of going there to-night?" asked Saint-Privat in no little trepidation.

"It is not likely that he will do so. But we had better take a pair of pistols with us. I shall do so, and I advise you to do the same. Like that, we shall be prepared for all emergencies."

"I will; but, after all, for such a hazardous expedition as this, three men would be better than two. What if we took——"

"Whom?"

"Why, Bourdache, of course. I know no one else whom I could trust," replied the old spy.

"You know him better than I do, sir," said Cornillon, with a pout; "but all I can say is that your Bourdache does not suit me. He marks badly, as we say at the 'house.' -By the by, did he ever belong to it?"

"No, indeed. On the contrary," answered Saint-Privat, with a faint smile.

"On the contrary? I don't quite understand what you mean, sir."

"Yes, he is a fellow with a bad record," answered the ex-director of the dark room. "I got him out of his trouble, but I have kept proofs enough to have his head cut off if ever he played me a trick."

"That is something, but it might be a reason for his wishing to get rid of you," remarked the sententious Cornillon.

"No. His record is in a safe place, and I have warned him that if he ever ventured to play me false, some one would bring certain papers before the officers of the law, of whom he stands in wholesome terror."

"Oh, if that's the case, sir, I have nothing more to say, and I'll wager a thousand francs that to-morrow, by this time, you'll have the will in your pocket. Ha! ha! We shall manage it beautifully. All the chances are in our favour."

"It will be thanks to you if we succeed, my old friend, and I assure you that you will not find me ungrateful."

"I trust to your generosity, sir. But the young lady, after all, did not act so badly in going to ask for the lieutenant's pardon, for if he should remain in prison you could not conclude the bargain that will give you the million."

"True," replied Saint-Privat, with a shrug of the shoulders; "it is not certain that he will be pardoned, however; but, be that as it may, I shall find some means of communicating with him. His situation is not a very serious one, as Trimoulac has not yet denounced him as a conspirator. The scamp is keeping that back as a final stroke of policy."

"I'm afraid he will denounce him before long."

"Bah! the marquis will certainly intercede for Bellefond, who rendered him such an important service; and besides, when it is known that Bellefond has a million of money, it will not be believed that he is a very dangerous conspirator."

"I did not think of that. You are right, master. To conspire, a man should be very poor. Now I'm off for the Butte Montmartre," said Cornillon, rising up and settling his hat on his head.

"And I will talk to Bourdache, so as to prepare him properly for our expedition."

"At ten o'clock, then."

"At ten o'clock," repeated Saint-Privat, graciously holding out his hand to his valued assistant.

Then the two arch-intriguers parted; and, while Cornillon was going away with a brisk stride, the father of the wayward Clarisse remarked to himself:

"I hope that it is not too late."

XVI.

THAT same eventful day, and at the very time when the artful Saint-Privat was talking with the cunning Cornillon as to the manner of conducting the necessary operations for finding the colonel's will, Maxime Trimoulac, otherwise the "Chevalier de Loupiac," was conferring in the boudoir of the Baroness de Sainte Gauburge with a robust-looking man, with an evil expression of countenance, who looked very much out of place on the silken sofa where he had seated himself beside Fouché's dashing detective.

The little occasional table was laden with cordials, as on the afternoon when the ex-director of the dark room had paid his memorable visit, but the ill-dressed individual now hobnobbing with Lucien's cousin drank a great deal more than Clarisse's father had done. It must also be admitted that Trimoulac kept up with him, and even touched glasses with him at every bumper, for he was not at all proud, the exercise of his functions as a detective having made him indifferent as to all social distinctions. He was as much at home in the lowest drinking den of the slums of Paris, on the look-out for a Jacobin conspirator, as in the drawing-room of an ambassador, mentally taking note of such political information as might fall from the lips of some inexperienced diplomatist.

Moreover, the man whom he made so welcome on the present occasion had long been his companion and equal in the hierarchy of the Rue de Jérusalem, and Loupiac, when he had reached the top of the ladder as a spy, had remained faithful to the friend who was still on one of the lower rungs.

If Tranquebar, as this veteran police agent was called, had not advanced, it was because he lacked steadiness, for he had every other requisite for the calling he followed.

He was as strong as Samson, as brave and as unscrupulous as Mandrin; he was also faithful to his masters, let them be whom they might, and he never discussed their orders. Unquestioning obedience was his motto, and he set to work at once, no matter what were the orders given him.

Under Rovigo, in Napoleon's time, he would not have hesitated to arrest a marshal had occasion required it, and under Fouché, now Louis XVIII.'s Minister of Police, he would not have shrunk from arresting an archbishop, great as had become the power and the prestige of the clergy.

Unfortunately, this model satellite had two slight faults—he drank and he gambled. It is true that, as a rule, he did not stagger when

he was intoxicated, but on certain occasions he had been overcome in his daily struggles with brandy, and these accidental failings of his had given him a bad name. Besides, regularly at the beginning of every month he lost nine-tenths of his pay at some low gambling-table, and this it was that made him look so shabby, for he never had enough funds to array himself in becoming attire.

The Baroness de Sainte-Gauburge's maid had shut the door in his face the first time that he had asked to see Loupiac, and the chevalier had been obliged to give positive orders so that he might be allowed to enter Zoé's elegant rooms.

Thus, for the past few days, he had been admitted without demur, and, indeed, on the last occasion the fair baroness herself had deigned to say a few pleasant words to him, for the question now was to save a fortune. Saint-Privat, foolish at times despite all his well-trained acumen, had let out too much, and Trimoulac had guessed everything. The spurious chevalier no longer doubted but what Zenobia Capitaine's niece had perished in his place, and that she had his uncle's missing will in favour of Lucien Bellefond about her.

Once on the track he had guessed the subtle plans of his competitor, the mealy-mouthed gentleman with the gold spectacles, and he understood that the old rascal now knew as much as he himself did. However, instead of losing his time in bewailing his own folly in having spoken of Virginie's walling-up, he at once made ready to seize upon the will.

In fact, while Clarisse's father—surprised by the sudden change in the situation—was still deliberating, Trimoulac, like a man of mettle, was acting. He had already made two visits to Montmartre, while Saint-Privat, poor old soul, was still arranging for his first trip there with the faithful Cornillon.

"And so, my old Tranquebar," said the chevalier, pouring his companion a glassful of rare old brandy, "you think that we shall get through it all to-night?"

"Certainly I do," replied the herculean Tranquebar; "I'm sure that we shall. We had deuced bad luck in having to search six pillars without finding the right one. It is true that for some time past I have had no luck at all. I have been eight days without winning a copper at cards, confound it!"

"Bah! you'll do better, old man! At cards, as in all things, perseverance is the main thing. And to help you to be all right with the croupiers, here is some new ammunition," added Loupiac, handing his acolyte a roll of twenty-five napoleons.

Tranquebar's eyes flashed, and snatching hold of the roll, he exclaimed:

"Good! you understand what life is, and no mistake! You know how to oblige a friend without lecturing him. That's the right way to act."

"I do not understand lecturing," answered Trimoulac, with a

smile. "And now, my dear friend, to business. You have not seen anything suspicious, inside or out, have you?"

"Nothing whatever," answered Tranquebar. "Besides, I didn't fear anything. In that neighbourhood, folks all go to bed with the fowls, and at nightfall there's not a soul to be seen. Now that I know the way, I go into the quarries just as though I were going home. I have never met any one at all suspicious near the height. As for the interior, there's no danger of any one going there. I work away there as quietly as in a workshop."

"Good! All the same, though, we must finish the work as soon as possible, and before we encounter some one else looking for the treasure. It would be uncommonly unpleasant if any one came interfering with us, or simply prying on us in the quarry."

"Oh! if any one should poke his nose inside the quarry while we are at work there, I'll undertake to dispatch him pretty quickly, and wall him up as neatly as though I were a mason myself."

Thereupon Tranquebar, glancing with quiet pride at his muscular form, indulged in a grim chuckle.

"That would be amusing, no doubt," said Trimoulac, with a sneering laugh, "but I prefer to avoid having recourse to violence. I have my reasons for that. Besides, I should like to see that old fool's face when he gets to the cavern and finds the pillars opened and the birds flown."

"You *can* see it if you like," answered Tranquebar, at this moment raising his glass and eyeing the brandy with the glance of a connoisseur.

"No. It would be imprudent to attempt that," responded the chevalier, who, like his competitor, Saint-Privat, seemed to be a peaceable kind of man, fonder of smooth villainy than of bandit tactics. "No, when I have got hold of the will I shall burn it, and we will go away. When a man is a millionaire, it is best for him to avoid compromising himself, and I shall be more than a millionaire, my friend."

"But I shall not," said Tranquebar, curtly, and with a somewhat gloomy look.

"I know what you mean, my dear fellow," responded Maxime with an easy air, "and I have not forgotten what I promised you; six thousand francs a year, in monthly instalments, as long as you live, and meals with me once a week."

"And we shall always have some of this same brandy, I hope. Fine stuff it is, and no mistake," remarked the bibulous detective.

"As much as you like, my dear fellow, and there will be perquisites also—little presents, and so on—you know me, and you know that I am not mean. Whenever you are not lucky at cards, why then, you understand——"

"That is enough, Loupiac," exclaimed Tranquebar, squeezing his

patron's hand with his huge fingers. "Between us a life-long friendship commences from this time forth."

"I believe you. But I say, tell me, don't you think that we had better begin earlier to-night?"

"I shall be there at nine."

"Very good. Then I will join you at half-past nine. I do not wish to have to return to that horrible cavern after to-night. Let's finish with it as speedily as possible."

"It is your fault that we have been obliged to go there three times all to no purpose. You could not find the right place, and I have had to do a great deal of pickaxe work for nothing. It's trying, strong as one may be, I can tell you."

"You had better say that it is the fault of that confounded investigating magistrate who has been questioning Cyrille."

"You mean Cyrille the mason, I presume?" said Tranquebar, who, without waiting for any invitation on his friend's part, now poured himself out another glass of brandy.

"Yes, the fellow who recognised me, and who, thinking me dead, was so taken aback, that with a little pressure he betrayed his associates to me. I thought that I had done wonders in lodging him in the prison of La Force to prevent him from talking. I even agreed with him about it, and he let himself be arrested willingly, under the pretext that he was mixed up in some ridiculous sort of plot against the safety of the State. Between ourselves, my dear fellow, I think that he was glad to be put out of the way, for he ran the risk, you know, of being stabbed by some of his good friends, the masons, who already suspected him of having betrayed them. Well, I got him into the prison, and everything was going on well. I was quite delighted; I saw the fellow whenever I wished, and I intended to ask him about the precise position of the pillar in which the man who was captured at my house was walled up. But then, confound it, the public prosecutor must needs take up the matter, just by way of showing his zeal. All these fellows want to make a great display of loyalty just now. Then, to make matters worse, a very zealous investigating magistrate is chosen. It's always like that after a change of government!"

"You are quite right," said Tranquebar, nodding his head as if to accentuate his approval.

"Well, Cyrille was placed in strictly secret confinement. Even I was not allowed to communicate with him. I went to Fouché to obtain permission to see him. But I could not even see his excellency, for he has recently married a nobleman's daughter, and there's no getting near him. He's become as stuck-up as he used to be familiar. And this is why Cyrille could not tell me where to find the right pillar. A man cannot think of everything, you know, and after what happened here only the other day to that old swine, there was no time to be lost. I was in a desperate hurry. Well, I went to find you to propose a bold stroke. You agreed, and you have

been working at it like a slave ever since the day before yesterday. However, after all, there has only been a little delay, and we have nearly reached our aim."

"That's certain," replied Tranquebar, "for there is only one more pillar to attack, and if the body that you are looking for isn't inside that one, why your man, Cyrille, must have lied."

"Oh! the body is there. But you are not drinking," added Maxime, and then, replenishing both the glasses once more, he said: "Your health, Tranquebar!"

"Yours, old man!" answered the burly detective. "I must say that those masons are terrible fellows to deal with. Seven bodies already found by me, and another that remains to be dug out, make a pretty collection."

"Yes; the production of those eight corpses would suffice to send the whole gang to the scaffold," replied Trimoulac, shrugging his shoulders.

"And that you intend to do, I suppose?"

"Bah! I don't know," answered the heir-at-law. "I shall soon be rich, you see, and I long to retire from the service to enjoy myself. I've well earned the right to do so. And so I may not say anything about these people and their affairs unless I think it absolutely indispensable to get rid of Lieutenant Bellefond. I have not yet denounced him as an accomplice of the Grand Mason, but as it is always as well to be on the safe side, I will attend to him tomorrow, when I have burned my uncle's previous will."

At this moment the door curtain was raised, and a gaily-attired lady, a very pronounced brunette, appeared upon the threshold of the room.

Tranquebar, who was somewhat afraid of the baroness—for this was she—rose up as though he had a spring inside of him, made a military salute, and took up his hat to go.

Loupiac, who was aware that the baroness wished to speak to him privately, did not attempt to detain his pal, and so the two confederates parted, after exchanging the significant words:

"To night, then!"

XVII.

THE clock of the church of Saint-Eustache, overlooking the central markets of Paris—then very different from what they are to-day—was striking ten at night. Saint-Privat must now be at the foot of the Butte Montmartre, on the esplanade of which the trusty Cornillon was waiting, while Trimoulac must already be inside the cavern with his herculean assistant, Tranquebar.

At a stone's throw from Saint-Eustache, in the office of the Rue des Bourdonnais, Vernède, the banker, sat talking with Timoléon Machefer. They both wore long military-looking coats, and heavy sticks rested against their chairs.

In a corner there were two pickaxes and two torches, such objects as the clerks of the house have never beheld in their master's private office.

The banker was looking very grave, but his friend's cheerful face was the same as ever. It still bore that pleasant, open, frank expression which made everybody in the neighbourhood like him.

A faint light fell upon them from the shaded lamp resting on the table, and it was easy to see that they were not talking of business affairs. Indeed, their conversation had reference to the very matters that had for some days engrossed the attention of Saint-Privat and Maxime Trimoulac. That may seem strange, as strange as the presence of the pickaxes and torches in that room where, as a rule, ledgers, pens, and papers, were the more conspicuous objects.

"Then you still think that this may prove a useful expedition?" said Thomas Vernède to his friend.

"It is the only chance that Lucien now has, and that you have," replied Machefer, promptly. He was never deaf in the banker's society.

"If it were only for me I should not go."

"I believe that, for I know you," said the provision dealer, "but your daughter's happiness depends upon the success of the attempt. It is well to remember that."

"Not her happiness. Riches are not happiness," replied Vernède, after the fashion of an eighteenth-century philosopher of Rousseau's school.

"Theoretically you are right," observed Machefer; "but if Thérèse marries Lucien Bellefond, and he be without any money, while you leave none to your daughter, what will become of them both?"

"Thérèse would then have to work like her mother, who was as poor as myself when I married her."

"Your daughter would certainly have the courage to do so; and Bellefond is energetic and intelligent enough to make his way; but it is none the less certain that their lot would be very different if he inherited Colonel Lacaussade's millions, which are lawfully his."

"I should have preferred it if he had earned the money," answered Vernède, whose mind that evening seemed full of abstract notions of moral philosophy.

"So should I, for he would have it then," responded the practical-minded provision dealer. "Whereas, in the present situation, he has not got it, at least as yet. However, my dear friend, just look at the matter as it really is. Your daughter, as you are well aware, does not wish to marry any one, save Lucien; and if she does not marry him she will simply die of sorrow. I am not exaggerating, and I have not the slightest desire to cause you any unnecessary pain. But the facts speak for themselves. Thérèse's health has already suffered since Bellefond's imprisonment."

"That is only too true," answered Thomas Vernède, heaving a deep sigh.

"On the other hand you, my old friend, after twenty years of honest toil, are seemingly about to lose the fruit of your labours. This misfortune, should it really happen, would be an irreparable one. At your age a man has not time to make a fortune over again, even if he has enough will and energy left him."

"I should not try to do so," replied Vernède, in a gloomy voice, which fully indicated how distressed he was at heart.

"That may be; you might resign yourself to ruin, but—forgive me for reminding you of the sad truth my friend—you must also file your schedule; in short, failure is at the end of it all."

"And failure is dishonour. I am aware of that," said Thomas Vernède, bitterly. "I had hoped to avoid it, but I have met with fresh disasters during the last two months. When I have repaid the Marquis de Baffey those three hundred thousand francs which he deposited with me, I shall not have enough to meet my engagements for the end of this month."

"You are resolved to pay those three hundred thousand francs, I presume?" asked Machefer.

"Oh! I would rather die a thousand times than remain in the power of that insolent fellow, Baffey."

"Well, to-day is the 9th September," said Machefer; "if I am not mistaken, the payment must be made the day after to-morrow at noon, or thereabouts."

"Yes, the money is ready."

"But didn't you also tell me that you had a heavy payment to make to-morrow?"

"Yes, to my correspondent at Havre. I had been notified of it, but I wrote back asking him not to draw upon me till the 25th. Be-

tween now and then something may come in. I have had business with that banker for a very long time, and our connection has been too pleasant a one for him to refuse my request."

"You have taken a wise precaution," rejoined the provision dealer, approvingly. "In a fortnight's time from now Bellefond will be recognised as the colonel's heir; and as he is your partner, your firm will triumph over all its worries, for when once Lucien is admitted to be a millionaire, he will have no difficulty in raising the needful ready money. You see, my dear Thomas, that first of all, in fact before and above everything else, we must help your nephew to establish his claims."

"Yes, I know that you are right, and that it is my duty to go in search of this inheritance which will enrich my daughter's affianced suitor; and yet the idea of this search fills me with repugnance. Why does not he undertake it himself?"

"Bellefond?" ejaculated Machefer, in amazement. "How on earth can he do so when he is in prison?"

"He will not stay there for ever. We have had reason to fear that he might be implicated in a plot; but the conspiracy of the masons has not been discovered, or we should certainly have heard of it. In fact, if the association were threatened we should have been pounced upon already. Lucien is accused of the duel only, and however severe the king's magistrates may be, they cannot keep him in prison long for such a matter as that."

Thomas Vernède no doubt considered that these remarks of his were to the point, and justified his own repugnance to search for the missing will; but his friend Machefer was not of that opinion, as his answer clearly showed.

"Well, I admit that he may be released in a month, or in a fortnight even, if you like," said the provision dealer, "but that scamp Trimoulac will have had time to find the will a dozen times over."

"How can he know where it is?" asked the banker, who did not consider this to be at all a likely contingency.

"Must I tell you again what Vannier told me?" rejoined Machefer; "you know Vannier very well. He was one of the men who carried the sack on the night of——"

"Yes, yes, I know, I know," said Vernède, with the hastiness of a man who wishes to avoid having a painful subject mentioned. And painful indeed was this one to him; for since he had seen the so-called Chevalier de Loupiac in the flesh, he knew that a fatal mistake had been made on the night when for the last time he had officiated as Grand Master in the old quarry of the Butte Montmartre.

"Well, Vannier was under Brother Cyrille's orders that night," continued Machefer, unrelentingly, and, indeed, he had serious reasons for insisting. "Now Vannier, as well as you, has quite recently come upon the Chevalier de Loupiac, whom we all believed to be dead. Whom did he meet him with? Why, with that very

Cyrille, about whose treachery there can be no doubt. From all this it is evident that Trimoulac, who calls himself Loupiac, must know what was done with the unfortunate person who was captured in his place in the house on the Chaussée de Clignancourt."

For a moment Vernède seemed at a loss for a reply. Then, with some little hesitation he answered: "That does not prove, however, that he knows that this person was the unfortunate girl——"

"Whom Zenobia Capitaine had sent to Paris to deliver Lacausade's will to Lucien Bellefond. How on earth can you say that?" protested Machefer, indignantly. "Have you forgotten what I told you when I came back from Périgueux? Surely your memory cannot be so bad as all that. Did I not have proof, proof positive, that the scoundrel had written to the sutler-woman towards the end of the month of June, telling her to come to Paris; that he had signed this letter with Lucien Bellefond's name; and that, in this letter, he made an appointment at his house with this woman? She, mind, went to Paris wearing men's clothes. Now, having heard of the kidnapping, it is quite impossible for us to suppose that he has failed to think that it was Virginie Lasbaysses who was seized upon in his place and walled up in——"

"Enough, enough, I believe you now," replied the banker, who would never let his friend finish any allusion to the terrible affair of Montmartre.

"Well, then," resumed the provision dealer, energetically, and tapping the floor with his stick as if to give additional force to his words, "well, then, if you believe me, you will offer no further objections to the plan which I propose. To leave the colonel's will to the wretched spy and traitor, who wished to betray us all to the police, would be more than an error, it would be a positive crime, yes, a crime for which Lucien would have a perfect right to reproach you. He is my friend and yours; he is also your partner; and what is more, he will soon be your son, as he will marry Thérèse when he comes out of prison. You owe it to him to save his fortune."

The Grand Master rose up and began to walk up and down. His haggard face revealed the violence of his emotions. The stern, pitiless president of the masons' court was now utterly unnerved.

"And so," said he, in a hoarse voice, and stopping suddenly before Machefer, "I must untomb her, and look upon her—upon the body of the generous girl whose death I caused."

The provision dealer started as though the dead woman's ghost had appeared to him. He himself had expatiated upon the grim affair during the foregoing conversation, but he did not like to hear the terrible truth enunciated in this fashion.

Vernède, meanwhile, took another turn up and down the room. His anguish of mind was evident. The perspiration stood out upon his brow, and it was with a trembling hand that he wiped his moist eyes.

"Yes, alas ! it was I who gave the order," he finally resumed. "It was I who remained inflexible to all the prayers of Lucien, and who presided over the execution of that abominable sentence. Ah ! there is justice here below, and I have deserved my fate !"

Such was the banker's anguish that he groaned aloud.

"Yes, heaven is just," replied Machefer, "and it has punished you for having ordered this murder ; but you have expiated it, and although you doomed a human being to death, you did not intend to cause the death of an innocent being. Virginie Lasbaysses was the victim of a fatality which neither you nor I could have foreseen. It is an irreparable misfortune, I know ; but although you cannot restore the poor girl to life, you can at least fulfil her wishes. And it is your duty to do that, my friend. Calm yourself and reflect for a moment. If Zenobia's niece could speak to you from the grave, she would cry out to you to wrest the colonel's fortune from the unworthy heir whom he had cursed, and to complete the mission to which her life was sacrificed."

As Machefer finished this impressive address he brought his stick down upon the banker's writing table with a bang, making the dust fly out of the papers, and nearly upsetting an inkstand. Then he gazed hopefully at his friend, feeling certain that he had won his cause.

Indeed, the banker caught hold of his friend's hand, and pressed it convulsively.

"You are right," he muttered. "That is the only reparation that I can offer to the poor girl, who was executed by my fault. No matter what it may cost me, I will go with you to the quarries. It will be my punishment."

"That is right. Thank God, you are yourself again, my old comrade," said Machefer, who was much more affected than he wished to let the banker see. "It is hard to do this, I know it full well, but you are a man, and there are occasions on which a man ought to keep his repugnance under control, no matter what may be its motive. Besides, I shall be there ; and I promise to spare you the sad task which a stern necessity has imposed upon us."

Then once more the provision dealer looked inquiringly at his friend.

"Yes," said Thomas Vernède, bitterly, "you will be able to bear the sight of her dead body, for you did not assassinate her."

And again he made a gesture of despair.

"I have my share in the responsibility of the tragedy," observed Machefer, on hearing this, "for Lucien is the only one among the masons who protested against the sentence ; still, I shall have the courage to do my duty, painful though it may be."

"And I shall have the courage to go with you," replied the Grand Master, in a firm voice.

"Well, then, the hour has come," said Machefer, rising up and buttoning his coat. "It is a long way from here to the quarries,

but I hope that we shall not have to remain there any great length of time. I recall only too well the frightful scene of that Sunday night, and I can well remember the place where the pillar stands. I have procured two pickaxes in case one should break ; one must foresee all contingencies. However, I will work alone. And, indeed, I should not have asked you to accompany me if it had not been necessary to guard against a possible encounter with that rascal Loupiac, or some of his agents. Are you armed, Vernède ?”

“Yes,” replied the banker, promptly. “I have a brace of pistols about me.”

“So have I ; and I am sure that we are worth six of those rascals. We can hide the tools and torches under our coats. We ought not to delay a moment longer in going to Montmartre. Come, let us start.”

“I am ready,” replied Thomas Vernède. “We will each take our share of the implements.”

A few moments later the two friends, duly provided with every requisite, sallied forth from the old house in the Rue des Bourdonnais.

As they crossed the courtyard the banker wiped away a tear. On looking up at the crumbling, weather-stained walls, he had seen a light in the room where Thérèse spent her nights bewailing the fate of her lover, Lucien Bellefond. But the time for action had come, and Vernède, trying to dismiss his melancholy thoughts, strode after Machefer in the direction of the Rue Montmartre.

XVIII.

THE public timepieces of Paris were well regulated that evening, for, while ten was striking at the clock of Saint-Eustache's church, it was also striking at the church clock at Montmartre, and the last stroke was still vibrating when Saint-Privat's acolyte, Cornillon, who had been hiding at the foot of the Butte for twenty minutes or so, rose up, and came stealthily out of his nook.

He had seen two shadowy forms approaching noiselessly, and seemingly wending their way towards the spot where he was crouching down.

The recognition was mutual.

Despite the darkness, Cornillon recognised Saint-Privat and the doorkeeper Bourdache, while they on their side guessed that the person whom they had caught sight of must be Cornillon. The latter, as he suddenly stood up, seemed to have sprung from the bowels of the earth, like some Satanic apparition.

Still, they opined that it was he ; for who else could be watching in that lonely spot in such terrible weather ?

The rain was pouring down in torrential fashion, and the wind was blowing furiously ; indeed, one was reminded of an equinoctial storm. The sky was as black as ink, not a star peered forth, and in this lonely region the street lamps—but few in number, by the way—gave no more light than mere sparks.

The esplanade stretched afar, and seemed to be entirely deserted, so that there was no fear of being disturbed.

It would have been hard to find a night more suited for the strange, projected search. At all events, such was Cornillon's opinion, judging by the manner in which he began the conversation.

"This is famous weather, sir, famous !" he exclaimed, as he gleefully rubbed his hands. "If I had ordered it of the clerk of the weather himself it could not suit one better."

"That may be, but I am wet to the skin," growled Saint-Privat. "I shall have a frightful cold to-morrow. My poor bones are already aching with a touch of rheumatism."

"You can dry yourself in the cavern, sir," answered Cornillon, again speaking in the same cheery fashion. "You cannot imagine how much warmer it is in there."

"Did you go in ?"

"Not very far," answered the spy. "The fact is, I did not wish to go in without you ; but I know my way all right now, and we shall get along very well, I promise you."

"Did you bring the axes with you?" now inquired Saint-Privat, as he wiped the rain-drops off his face.

"They are in the vestibule, as you might call it. He! he! a joke that! Three axes and three torches, mind, besides my lanterns. I had a terrible load to carry, let me tell you!"

"I have brought some pistols," observed Saint-Privat, "and Bourdache has done the same. If Trimoulac meddles with our affairs he will find his match."

Clarisse's usually pacific father seemed to have suddenly developed some strangely bellicose proclivities.

"Trimoulac!" retorted Cornillon, "oh! he likes his ease too well to come out in such weather. He must be drinking Jamaica rum or old Cognac with his lady-love the baroness."

"As long as he is not in the cavern, that is all I care for," said Saint-Privat.

"Don't be afraid, sir! I know his ways. He will come here some fine night, sure enough, but it will be too late. The birds will have flown when that dear, good chevalier appears."

"I shouldn't be sorry if I had a chance to break his head for him," growled Bourdache, in his pugnacious way.

"You should never have an inclination for anything that might bring you before the law courts," said Cornillon, philosophically. "Besides, I must say that you surprise me. What did the baroness's admirer ever do to you?"

"Nothing; but I don't like spies, that's all," answered Bourdache, dogmatically.

"Come now, comrade, I belong to the 'house,' mind, and so does the governor, so to say."

"Enough of this!" exclaimed the ex-director of the dark room, who foresaw the disadvantage of any quarrel. "We have no time to talk. Go ahead and show us the way."

Cornillon obeyed. He no doubt resented Bourdache's last remark, and he was, as already stated, by no means partial to the sturdy doorkeeper; but, on the other hand, he did not care to quarrel with him, as he happened to be stronger than himself.

The council had been held at a distance of thirty paces or so from the height. The trio now glided into the opening, where Lucien Bellefond and Timoléon Machefer had waited crouching, one night, now long ago, and they made their way onward—not, however, without Saint-Privat being badly torn by the brambles, and nearly tumbling down on account of the stones.

"Here we are!" said Cornillon, as he parted the bushes to make way for his patron.

"I see nothing but a hole, which seemingly leads nowhere," growled Clarisse's father.

"Don't be afraid, sir," answered Cornillon, still as cheery as ever; "the devil is on our side, I'm sure of it."

"That may be, but he does not light up the landscape," retorted Saint-Privat, with unexpected facetiousness. "I can't see any better than if I were in an oven."

"Take hold of the flap of my coat, sir," suggested Cornillon; "let the doorkeeper keep behind you, and I will go ahead. In three minutes' time or so we shall not need to grope along. My lantern is in the passage ten paces from here."

No one raised any objection, and on they went like snakes slipping into their holes.

Three minutes had barely elapsed when, as Cornillon had stated, they caught sight of a lighted lantern resting upon the ground in the passage near the three axes, which the detective had provided.

This lantern was of the kind habitually used both by burglars and detectives. Three of its sides were made of tin, which intercepted the light, the latter only showing on the fourth side, which was covered with glass.

"The deuce!" said Saint-Privat, somewhat testily, as he glanced at the lantern, "how shall we be able to work with such a light as that. It's no good at all!"

"Never fear, sir," answered Cornillon, promptly; "I have brought three torches, which we will light by and by. This little affair here is only to help us to see our way along the vestibule. I thought it best not to make a great illumination. I hope that there is no one inside the place; but all the same, you know, one cannot be too careful."

"You are right. I must admit it. One never knows what may happen," responded the ex-director of the dark room.

Cornillon, delighted at being complimented by his employer, now hastily distributed the various paraphernalia.

Each of them took up a torch and an axe, and the detective, who also carried the lantern, went on ahead, stepping cautiously, and keeping both his eyes and his ears well open. But he saw nothing save the dripping walls on either side and the darkness ahead, which the lantern progressively furrowed with a ray of light, whilst the only audible sound was that made by their heavy boots as they stepped onward over the rough ground.

The passage seemed to be a long one to all three of them. This narrow, tortuous, stony entry, where Lucien had felt so ill at ease on the night of the execution, was as unpleasant as ever.

They tripped more than once, knocked their heads against the upper vault, which in some places was very low, and scratched their hands against the rough walls, which they felt by way of guiding themselves. Still they persevered with the tenacity of men who have a great purpose in view.

Cornillon, noting that his employer was in difficulties, and remembering, moreover, that the utmost prudence was necessary, soon turned the light of his lantern towards those who followed him,

Then, despite the darkness ahead, he went on methodically, if slowly, and Saint-Privat, now better able to see, followed him with his head stretched out, and listening eagerly.

He seemed as though he had already smelt out the place where the missing will, destined to enrich him, lay concealed.

Bourdache, who had but little to gain by the hazardous venture, was the least excited of the trio.

Presently the vestibule of the cavern grew wider, and the detective, who although progress was now much easier, began to show various signs of anxiety, suddenly stopped short.

"I see a light," said he, in a whisper, as he turned towards Saint-Privat.

"Ah! we have come too late!" muttered Bourdache, who had overheard the remark.

"What's to be done?" resumed the detective, who seemed quite distressed by the discovery he had made.

"We had better go away as fast as we can," said the doorkeeper, who, despite his strength, was not conspicuous for bravery.

It is true that the danger confronting them was most mysterious. They could not tell what odds there might be against them.

"No!" suddenly exclaimed Saint-Privat, bolder even than his retainer, "I will not give the attempt up so easily. Can you go on without letting the lantern be seen, Cornillon?"

"That is easy, sir."

"Go on, then."

Stepping as softly as possible, they then went on a little further, and finally they came into the quarry, where an unexpected sight awaited them.

Beyond a vast zone of shadow in the depths of the huge vault there shone a brilliant light, furnished by four blazing torches, which were stuck in the ground.

This illumination glared upon three pillars, which were almost entirely demolished, and upon a fourth which two men, armed with pickaxes, were vigorously attacking. The loud blows which they dealt re-echoed throughout the dark quarry, amid which the disturbed bats fluttered here and there in a frightened way. With the flaming torchlight and the mysterious workers the whole scene had a singularly weird aspect. It was indeed a study for a painter.

However, our friend Saint-Privat was not at all in the proper frame of mind to appreciate the picturesque character of the sight. He was appalled, dismayed, quite heartbroken to think that, despite all his diligence, he had arrived too late. He now bitterly regretted having spoken so heedlessly in the presence of Trimoulac, for he did not doubt but what one of the two workers was the spurious Chevalier de Loupiac.

"They are there," he muttered at last, with a great effort.

"It is the chevalier, or may the lightning blast me!" rejoined Cornillon, in a whisper,

"One of the fellows looks at though he could fell an ox," growled Bourdache, in his turn.

There was a moment's stupor, and then Saint-Privat clutched his hair with rage and despair. This was indeed an overwhelming discovery.

"All is lost ! poor Clarisse !" gasped the old spy, "those rascals are stealing her dowry from me !"

"That is what comes of trusting fellows who belong to the police," said Bourdache to himself.

"Come, come, sir, there's nothing lost as yet. I have an idea," said Cornillon.

"An idea ?" repeated Saint-Privat, with a bewildered air. He himself could detect no ray of hope.

"Yes, indeed, sir. My idea is that those two fellows are only working for our benefit."

"Are you crazy ?"

"No, sir, not by any means. You yourself will admit that we should have had a deal of trouble in finding the pillar which we ought to open, and now these chaps have found it for us."

"They did not find it at once," muttered the irrepressible Bourdache, "for they have demolished quite half-a-dozen pillars already."

"Well ?" asked Clarisse's father, turning impatiently towards Cornillon.

"Well, sir," said the detective, "what is there to prevent us from letting them finish their work, and slipping along the wall, and hiding in the meantime ? They will not see my lantern ; I am keeping it behind me. So we can glide up without being seen, and hide behind some of the pillars that they have already opened, and when we are within twenty paces of these rascals, and can take a good aim, we will fire, each of us, bring the scamps down like so many rabbits, and then seize upon the will."

This plan was a bold one, no doubt, but it seemed to be practicable ; and, besides, what other course could be followed if the chevalier was to be prevented from finding and destroying the will by which the late Colonel Lacaussade bequeathed his large fortune to Lucien Bellefond ?

"Cornillon," now said Saint-Privat, with a great show of emotion, "I shall never forget that but for you the million would have escaped me !"

"Then you think my idea a good one, sir ?" asked the detective, in a whisper.

"Excellent, my friend," replied the ex-director of the dark room, in the same low tone of voice.

"Very well, then. Let us act up to it."

Then slowly and noiselessly they glided along, in view of taking up their position behind the half-demolished pillars,

XIX.

NATURALLY enough the road to the quarries—that passage along which Saint-Privat had groped with so much difficulty—was familiar to Thomas Vernède and to Machefer, who, as masons, had frequently penetrated within these gloomy precincts.

They had no trouble in finding their way; but when they came to the entrance of the vault in which the poor victim who had been “walled-up” by his orders was entombed, the Grand Master felt greatly agitated.

He possessed a strong mind, as he had proved on various occasions, but the execution of Virginie Lasbaysses had led him to reflect a great deal as to his past course of action.

The error which he had committed in dispensing the stern justice of the society was indeed calculated to disturb him. In fact, for the first time in his life he doubted the right to deal out such justice.

He asked himself, moreover, whether the real or supposed transgressions of the government which he was so desirous of overthrowing gave him the right to dispose of the life of a fellow-creature, and he had almost made up his mind that they did not give him such a right.

Machefer, who had but a small part of responsibility in this singularly unfortunate affair, was much less overcome by the remembrance of the scene enacted in the quarry on the night of the 2nd of July.

Moreover, his naturally careless disposition upheld and sustained him on trying occasions, and he was generally disposed to reconcile himself to the inevitable.

It is certain that he sincerely deplored the sad fate of Zenobia Capitaine’s niece, but as he had no power to bring her to life again, he considered that he ought to content himself with carrying out her intentions by snatching the will from Trimoulac’s clutches.

To prevent that rascal from appropriating the colonel’s money would be some slight revenge for Virginie’s death, for, to tell the truth, it was the Chevalier de Loupiac who had brought her into that fatal trap by the forged letter which he had sent to Périgueux, and he was perhaps even more culpable than the masons themselves.

While Machefer and Vernède were on the way from the Rue des Bourdonnais to Montmartre, these reflections had been communicated by the provision dealer to the banker, for he thus hoped to comfort him, and, in fact, he had succeeded in doing so to some extent.

Still Vernède had only replied by monosyllables, and when they reached the foot of the height, the provision dealer had nothing more to bring forward in the way of consolation.

The time and place were ill suited to conversation, and the weather had become abominable, as it was raining in torrents, and the vast deserted esplanade offered no shelter whatever.

It was time to act, and Machefer, always expeditious, set to work immediately.

"I think," said he to his companion, "that we had better not light our torches in the passage. On such an occasion as this, my dear fellow, we cannot be too careful."

"As you please," replied Vernède, who seemed to be lost in painful thoughts.

"Besides, we do not need any light," resumed the provision dealer. "I know the way into the quarry as well as I know my own staircase, and I will go ahead."

The banker did not reply to this remark, but mechanically followed his old friend, who was already going towards the opening where, two months before, he had waited in Lucien's company for Virginie's executioners.

"Hallo!" said he, as he bent down to explore the entry, "the brambles are broken, and lots of the branches are pulled on one side. Some of the thistles have even been rooted up, and these breaks are all fresh. Some one has come this way quite recently, I feel certain of it."

"Some of the brethren, perhaps," remarked Vernède, in a careless way, for his thoughts were hardly with the present.

"That's impossible," retorted Machefer. "What on earth could they come here for? They know that the police have their eyes open just now, and they are not so mad as to endanger themselves by entering the quarry. To tell the truth, I am afraid that Loupiac has been here. What do you think, Vernède?"

"I think that at all events the matter must be brought to an end. I did not wish to come, but you persuaded me to do so. We are here, so let us enter, at all hazards. Besides," added the banker, "I shouldn't be sorry to meet that scoundrel face to face."

"You have something to say to him, have you not?" rejoined Machefer, with a laugh.

"I shall break his head with this pickaxe," replied the banker, in a threatening tone.

His hatred of Loupiac was greater than ever now; for he had not merely occasion to reproach him for his treachery as regards the society—it was through him that the unfortunate Virginie Lasbaysses had met her death.

"Upon my word, I will aid you willingly in ridding the earth of the reptile," answered Machefer. "If it be really he who is ahead of us, and we find him in here, he will be alone, or, at all events, he will not have many assistants with him, for he would not bring a squad

of police spies to help him to find that will which he is so anxious to destroy. Let us go in."

Then, slipping into the opening, the provision dealer speedily reached the passage. Vernède followed closely. The route was well known to them. They had passed along it often enough to be acquainted with every turn, and had soon gone over its entire length.

Trimoléon Machefer, who was ahead of his friend, was naturally the first to see what was going on in the depths of the quarry.

The torches lighted by Loupiac and his assistant now shone more brilliantly than ever, and their light would have instantly caught far less practised eyes than those of the wary Machefer, who stopped short and held out his hand to prevent Vernède from going further.

"I was right," he whispered. "The rascal has come here before us, and is at work already."

"He is not alone," muttered the banker, as he craned his head forward to get a better view of the strange sight.

"Of course not; he was afraid to work by himself, and so he has brought an assistant with him. I wonder where he found that tall, long-legged fellow, who is working away with so much energy."

"That fellow must be some rascal like himself, of course," responded Vernède.

"I suspect so; and he is very hard at work. Why, he has destroyed half the pillar already."

"It is not the first one either, the others are already more or less demolished."

"That is a good proof that they do not know exactly where the body was buried," muttered Machefer. "And, by the way, that strikes me as being very astonishing! Cyrille might have given Loupiac full particulars when he betrayed us, for he was at the execution."

"What does it matter? He will soon know the truth, the pillar that he is now working upon, is the very one in which that poor woman was walled up," rejoined Vernède, in a hoarse voice.

The emotion which he felt was no doubt shared by Machefer, who remained silent, and leant against the wall of the corridor, gazing upon the weird scene.

Where they stood the two friends were completely out of sight. The brighter the light of the torches flaring in the centre of the quarry, the denser the shadows all around.

Thus it was impossible for Loupiac and his assistant to see Vernède and Machefer. However, the latter could see perfectly well. They did not miss a single movement; each stroke dealt by the fellow who was working for the spurious chevalier was alike visible and audible from the entrance of the passage where they stood.

"What shall we do?" asked Machefer, after a moment spent in gazing at the scene and forming resolutions.

"We must kill them," replied the Grand Master, with an impressive gesture.

"I agree with you. But how? They are too far off to be shot with pistols," replied the provision dealer.

"Yes, indeed, that's true; we should miss them. And what's more, the noise would give the alarm; they would put out their torches at once, and so escape us."

"Certainly; and I see but one course available," resumed Machefer. "It is to glide up behind them and knock them down with our pickaxes."

"Very well. I should even prefer that. At least, I should see them die," responded Vernède, savagely.

"I should enjoy it, too—the wretched informers!"

Machefer, as his words evidenced, had suddenly developed a most sanguinary disposition.

"How shall we get near enough to them?" the Grand Master now inquired.

"Oh! it is very easy. We must keep along the wall till we are near one of the pillars, then we will fall upon them, taking care, first of all, to shelter ourselves behind the pillars. We can crawl along, if necessary. As long as we keep out of the circle of light afforded by the torches, that will be everything."

"When we are near enough we will fall upon them."

"All right. But let us leave our torches here, for they would only be in our way when we make a rush upon them. There's no time to lose, Vernède. That great fellow is striking away without cessation. With a few more strokes he will bring down the whole pillar."

"Come!" said Vernède, who had now fully made up his mind to bring matters to a violent issue.

Machefer had just emerged from the entrance gallery, and he was about to advance in the direction of the pillars previously demolished, when all at once, in an apprehensive way, he seized hold of his friend's arm. Clutching it firmly, he whispered: "Look there!"

"What do you mean? I cannot see anything," whispered Vernède in reply.

Indeed, the scene appeared to be unchanged. The chevalier's assistant was still hard at work; the torches flared; the bats flew around. What else could Machefer have noticed?

"Come," he responded; "look over there, on the left. Don't you distinguish that faint light that is coming along in the shade?"

"Ah, yes, I see it now. It must be a lantern."

"A lantern, which somebody or other is carrying, sure enough."

"Yes, the light is moving."

"It is going in the direction of the spot where Loupiac stands."

"Yes, you are right. The man who carries it must be one of his hirelings who is about to join him."

Machefer, however, was not of this opinion.

"No," said he; "if the man with the lantern was in the chevalier's pay he would walk straight along; but see, he is going along sideways, and stops from time to time in a suspicious, half-apprehensive manner. I feel sure that he is hiding, and stealthily watching the others."

"True. Any one would think that he is doing precisely what you just suggested we should do."

"That is my opinion."

"Well, all this is incomprehensible to me," resumed Thomas Vernède; "and I cannot imagine who that man with the lantern can be."

"I can guess who it is," replied the quick-witted provision dealer.

"Who is it, then?"

"Why, the other rascal, of course; the man who also has an interest in getting the colonel's will, and who has been Loupiac's competitor throughout this business."

"I really don't understand you," replied Vernède, with some little impatience.

"What! Have you forgotten what I told you about my journey to Périgueux? Don't you remember the goings-on of that fellow Bonnin, the swaggerer whose conversation I heard at the café in the Rue des Bourdonnais, the man with the gold spectacles who sat on my left in the coach when I travelled to the south?"

"Can it be that fellow?" asked the Grand Master, somewhat incredulously.

"Of course it is he! The two rascals are both playing the same game, and they have naturally come to the only place where the coveted will is to be found."

"But they have not come to an understanding, it would seem," remarked Vernède, still but partially convinced.

"No, indeed! If they were acting in concert they would have come together and be working together, but—look—the fellow carrying the lantern has just stopped behind one of the partially-demolished pillars!"

"Yes, the light is not moving now," said Vernède. "Well, if that fellow is Bonnin, as you suppose, it would seem as if he were going to attack Trimoulac."

"Yes, indeed," responded Machefer. "He is going to carry out a plan like the one which we had made."

"What! do you think——"

"That he would kill the Chevalier de Loupiac?—of course I do," was Machefer's ready retort.

"I doubt it, remembering what you told me of the man. He must be a coward. He would not venture to attack two persons."

"How do you know that he is alone?"

"It seems to me——"

"Ah! I was not mistaken," now ejaculated the provision dealer,

in a barely audible tone. "That light, which is that of a dark lantern, fell just this moment upon two men who are behind the one ahead. Bonnin is prudent, and has brought some assistants with him. That's clear enough."

"But what are they about to do?" asked Vernède. And, indeed, the situation was a puzzling one.

"I do not exactly know, but I imagine that they have the same intention as we had. They will probably steal up to the two men and kill them with their pistols, if they have any—which is probable."

"What are they waiting for, then?"

"They are no doubt waiting till Trimoulac finishes with his work. Bonnin, by dint of ferreting about, possibly learnt the story of Virginie Lasbaysses's disappearance. He must have discovered, I fancy, that she was seized by mistake and walled up in one of the pillars in this quarry, but he did not know which pillar it was. He concluded, however, that his rival must know."

"Then he was mistaken," retorted Thomas Vernède; "for if Loupiac had known he would not have tried so many pillars in which he has found nothing. This work has not all been done in one night. Who knows how many times he has been here already? Judging by the amount of work which has been accomplished, I should think he had been here on three or four occasions at the least."

"Perhaps so; Bonnin may have followed him from the beginning," suggested Machefer. "At all events, he will watch him now till he has found the will, which will soon happen, for the workman is making rapid progress."

"Then you think—"

"I think that old Bonnin and his men will fire at Maxime Trimoulac and his companion as soon as they fancy that the right moment has come, and as they seem to me to be quite near enough to take a good aim, they will not miss them."

"And when they have despatched them, they will snatch the will from them, I suppose."

"That is certain."

"A double murder, side by side with a dead body!" exclaimed Vernède, bitterly.

"Those people have no scruples, that is quite certain," responded the provision dealer.

"Do you mean to let them do this?"

Machefer looked in amazement at his companion. But they could not distinguish one another's features; and the banker's friend contented himself with asking, by way of reply:

"Can you intend to defend Loupiac?"

"No, but I confess that I do not like to see this deed done," answered Vernède, promptly.

"It is indispensable, however."

"What is your plan, then?"

"My plan is this. It is a simple one, as you will see. To begin with, we must not stir from here. We are in the best box at a play, as it were. Thanks to those four torches provided by our friend Trimoulac, we can see all that goes on. We shall see two rascals exterminated by three other rascals. It will be quickly accomplished, I fancy, and as soon as the conquerors seize upon the fruits of their victory, that is to say, when they have found the will, they will make off—that is to say, they will come in this direction. Now this is a good place to lie in wait for them."

"And to attack them? So that is what you mean?" responded the Grand Master.

"Yes, and if you are not willing to do that, I am. I feel pugnacious to-night. My pickaxe would settle the three scamps, who will not expect an attack, and will not reload their pistols. When we are rid of them, I will take Colonel Lacaussade's will out of Bonnin's pocket, and we will leave this cursed quarry to return no more. To-morrow morning Lucien Bellefond will be a millionaire. What do you say to that plan?"

Machefer expected that his friend would readily acquiesce to this sanguinary scheme. But Vernède, violent as he was at times, by no means approved of wholesale slaughter.

"I say that I will defend you if your life is in danger, but I will not make any attack," he replied. "I am perfectly willing to kill that scoundrel Loupiac, but I cannot forget that the others have done me no harm."

"Come to my help, then, if I need you, that is all I ask," replied Machefer.

The whole of this singular conversation had been carried on in a very low tone, and, moreover, the noise of the pickaxe wielded by Loupiac's assistant was echoed by the vault above, and thus prevented the talk being heard.

Tranquebar was working away furiously with his herculean arms, excited by the presence and encouragement of his employer, from whom he expected an income of six thousand francs a year, plus a good dinner, and a liberal supply of fine old brandy once a week.

The Chevalier de Loupiac, on his side, unremittingly urged on the work of demolition, which, thanks to Tranquebar's strength, proceeded with astonishing rapidity. Great blocks of plaster fell at each blow of the pickaxe, and rolled upon the ground, which was strewn with huge fragments.

The pillar which the workman had attacked had already been sounded on various sides, for there were gaps all round it, and the particular breach that was now being assailed was growing visibly wider.

"The end is near at hand," muttered Machefer, after a moment spent in watchful scrutiny. "Bonnin and his friends are creeping up closer I see."

"I just saw the butt of a pistol, I think," replied Vernède, who also kept his eyes upon the scene.

"I say, Thomas," resumed the provision dealer, "what if Loupiac should see his rivals before they fire? In that case he would probably attack them first, and then we should see a regular fight. It would be very amusing."

"I shouldn't be sorry if matters took that course," answered the Grand Master. "In that way they would all kill one another, and you would not be driven to soiling your hands with the blood of these scamps."

"Well, I was mistaken, it seems; we shall not have the pleasure of seeing the battle from afar, for Loupiac is just popping his head into the hole which the other man has made."

"And I see the three other fellows gliding along by the wall. They are going round the pillar over there. It hides them—see, they have all three disappeared."

"Oh! I understand their game," muttered Machefer. "They are going to fire when they are close enough."

"I no longer see them, so I can't say," whispered Vernède.

Another moment of suspense passed by.

"They are in sight again," suddenly observed Machefer; "they are stooping down, and now, see, they are creeping along just like cats watching a mouse."

"Cannot Loupiac see them?" asked the banker.

"No, he is looking into the gap to find out whether the workman who is leaning upon his pickaxe has made the hole big enough for them to drag the sack out."

"They will be shot," muttered Vernède at this moment, "for the others are about to fire."

"No, not yet; for, look, the chevalier is straightening himself up again!"

"And now the others are crouching down."

"Well," remarked Machefer, "it seems that the opening is not wide enough, for Loupiac has made a sign to his companion to go on working, and, indeed, he is beginning again lustily. What blows! If he goes on like that he will bring down the whole pillar. What on earth can Bonnin be waiting for to fire? The chevalier gave him a good chance just now—he was standing with his back to him, and the other was working away. I wonder how it will all end."

Our portly friend witnessed the termination of the affair much sooner than he had expected. Vernède was just seizing hold of his arm, and pointing in an excited way to Bonnin and his companions, who were about to make the attack, pistol in hand, when suddenly the upper part of the pillar in which the body of Zenobia's niece was entombed fell with a frightful crash. It had been cut atwain, as it were, by the blows of Tranquebar's pickaxe.

Then part of the vault, abruptly deprived of another of its supports, fell with the nearest pillars which were already half destroyed. An

enormous mass of the plaster fell like an avenging avalanche upon the five scoundrels, who, close to the hapless Virginie's remains, were about to dispute with one another for the possession of the colonel's will. And this mass, falling with the noise of thunder, crushed the miscreants, and buried them for ever.

Loud was the echo which boomed through the vast quarry, and so great was the shock that the soil quivered underfoot. It was like an earthquake, and the two friends were thrown with extreme violence against the walls of the entrance-passage, which was, fortunately, far enough off for the shock to lose its force there.

In an instant the bright light of the torches was extinguished, and profound darkness prevailed. The terrified bats wheeled round and round, and as the rumble of the subsidence ceased, the agonised shriek of an owl rose up from the black depths.

A thick dust filled the air, and it was scarcely possible for one to breathe.

"If we remain here ten minutes longer we shall be stifled," said Machefer. "I hope that the way out is free. Come."

Then, dragging Vernède with him, he rushed along the passage.

Fortunately enough there had been no subsidence here. The road was clear, and a few moments later the two friends found themselves at the foot of the height, on the very spot where, two months previously, the first act of the drama which had had such tragical results had been enacted.

The storm was over now, and the sky was bright with twinkling stars. The esplanade and the neighbouring streets were silent and deserted. The exterior appearance of the height was unchanged. It was evident that the catastrophe had been limited to an internal subsidence, the noise of which had been deadened in such a way that it had not attracted any attention outside. In all probability the mystery of the quarry would never be penetrated.

"Ah! good heavens! we have had a narrow escape," said Machefer, drawing a long breath; "but, at all events, all those rascals are dead."

"Heaven is just," replied Vernède, in a low tone, full of feeling, "for in punishing them it also chastises me for having condemned an innocent creature. Colonel Lacaussade's will is buried with the scoundrels who attempted to steal it from Lucien."

"The fact is," retorted the provision dealer, "that now, unless we blow up the Butte Montmartre, we shall never see the colonel's signature; but console yourself, my old friend, all is not lost; I will——"

"Heaven is just, I tell you," was Vernède's rejoinder. "I accept its judgment, and I will bear my punishment, hard as it may be, without a murmur."

Then slowly and thoughtfully the two friends retraced their steps towards the city gates,

XX.

ON the day following this eventful night, at three o'clock in the afternoon, Thomas Vernède was seated in his office. He had just finished examining some accounts, and was putting various important papers in order.

The expression of his face was even sterner than usual, and his contracted features told of the bitter struggle that was going on within him.

He had grown ten years older in one night.

He was, however, free from the worst of all tortures—suspense ; for he knew that the will was now irrevocably lost, and thus his mind was now fully made up.

He was aware, painfully aware, that he could not hope for any help from Lucien Bellefond, his partner, and he now only thought of regulating his affairs in view of the inevitable catastrophe.

It was the 10th of September, and he still had twenty days before him, but at the end of the month his failure would be an accomplished fact. There was not the slightest chance of his being able to avert it.

In one sense he was resigned, however, and he would have accepted his fate with perfect stoicism had it not been for one cruel thought. His beloved child would be reduced to poverty, and obliged to work for a livelihood, and this idea preyed like torture upon Thomas Vernède's mind.

Still he relied upon Thérèse's courage, and he hoped that she would have sufficient strength of mind to bear her undeserved misfortunes.

He had already traced out in his mind a plan of future action for himself and his daughter. He meant to employ the time remaining to him in preparing for the sad event which threatened him, and in getting together all his resources pending the arrival of that fatal date, the 30th of September.

Then, after having met his obligations as far as it was possible for him to do so, after expending his last copper in his effort to satisfy his creditors, he meant to leave the country with Thérèse.

Machefer would certainly lend him money enough to go to America, and there, on the free soil of a new world, there was some chance of an energetic and intelligent man making his way ; and, although the banker was no longer young, he felt himself endowed with sufficient energy to woo fortune once more.

Moreover, he did not doubt Thérèse's affection, and he knew that the noble girl would sacrifice everything for her father's sake, even her love ; still he did not wish to ask so much as that from her.

Lucien was in prison, but he could not remain there long, now that the man who had intended to denounce him as a conspirator was dead. The infamous Trimoulac, buried beneath the ruins of the vault at Montmartre, had perished before he had revealed the secret of the conspiracy. That old knave Saint-Privat, and his assistants, were also dead ; and to all appearance there remained no one who was at all likely to accuse Lieutenant Bellefond of a crime. The banker and Machefer were neither of them aware of the fact that Cyrille the traitor was in prison.

On the other hand, the duel with the Prussian officer was not of a nature to warrant a severe condemnation ; and, indeed, everything seemed to show that the young officer would be released without even being sent for trial. Machefer had learnt from the commissary of police who arrested Lucien that the two English officers who had acted as seconds had, on hearing of the affair, come of their own accord to certify that the duel had been conducted according to the code of honour.

It was therefore permissible to believe that Lucien would soon be set free, and the banker had made up his mind to ask him to go with him to the United States, against the promise that he should marry his daughter. He thought that the lieutenant would be willing to exile himself on those terms, and indeed he was not mistaken. Lucien would have made any sacrifice for the sake of his adored Thérèse.

If the prisoner's captivity lasted longer than the banker could wait, there would be nothing to prevent Lucien from crossing the ocean to join him when he at last regained his liberty, and Machefer would always be there to acquaint him with Thomas Vernède's intentions.

One consolation remained to the ruined banker and afflicted father. The three hundred thousand francs due to the Marquis de Baffey were ready for him and waiting. In order to keep them in readiness for the payment on the morrow, the 11th of September, he had, as the reader already knows, asked for a slight delay on the part of one of his creditors, to whom he owed a large sum, and he experienced a bitter satisfaction in the thought that he would not have to blush before Lucien's rival. Amid his overwhelming misfortune, this feeling alone brought him some little consolation.

"I will show that marquis that a man of the people like myself is as honourable as a nobleman like he is," muttered Vernède, as he leant back in his arm-chair ; "and if he still dares to parade his so-called generosity, if he has the audacity to renew his insolent offer of marriage, I will drive him from my office, as, indeed, I ought to have done the day when he first presumed to mention Thérèse's name."

While he was thus soliloquising, the door of the office abruptly opened, and the cashier appeared upon the threshold. He was a timid-looking little man, and wore glasses.

"What is the matter?" demanded the banker, testily. "I told you that I wished to be alone."

"I beg your pardon, sir," replied the cashier; "I should not have intruded, but it is on account of the note."

"What note?" inquired M. Vernède, with no little surprise.

The cashier seemed to be taken aback. "Why, sir, the money due to Costier & Co., of Havre," he replied; "a hundred and thirty thousand five hundred francs. As it is a large sum, I thought best to let you know——"

"To let me know what?" inquired the banker, who had now turned very pale.

"That I have paid it, sir," replied the cashier, in a placid, self-satisfied manner.

"You scoundrel!" exclaimed Vernède, rising hastily from his leather-seated arm-chair.

His agitation was so great that the cashier drew back in alarm. He evidently fancied that his employer had lost his wits.

However, the banker, controlling himself by a wonderful effort of will, resumed more quietly:

"That note ought not to have been presented to-day. I really cannot understand it. Did you not know that I had written to Havre to ask Messrs. Costier & Co. not to draw upon me till the 25th of this month?"

"That is true, sir," replied the cashier, "but those gentlemen replied that they had had unexpected calls upon their funds, and—their letter came at noon to-day—I was going to show it to you, but you were out, and just afterwards the note was presented. I did not know that you had returned, or I should have told you. In your absence, and having no orders to the contrary, I thought that I was doing right in paying the note on presentation."

Thomas Vernède passed his hand over his brow, closed his eyes for an instant, and then fell rather than seated himself on his chair again.

"You did right," he answered.

The cashier then bowed and left the room.

"I am lost!" muttered the unfortunate banker, in despair. "I am lost! I am disgraced for ever! To-morrow that man will come to claim the money which he confided to me, and I shall have to tell him that I have not got it. Then he will have the right to call me a thief, that haughty nobleman whom I meant to dismiss as soon as I had paid him! By God! I could strangle him! But no, he will not insult me, he will propose to buy my daughter's hand for the three hundred thousand francs that I cannot return to him! That will be his plan—a plan worthy of him and his species! Ah, God in heaven! this is too much!"

Then Vernède, raising his hands to his head, fell into the most despairing thoughts.

This was the last blow. It was all over. The one hope that had remained to him had vanished. The future life which he had hoped to lead with Thérèse across the ocean could not be realised, for he was not a man to bear the shame of the morrow, and whatever might take place during the coming interview with the Marquis de Baffey, the unfortunate banker felt that the meeting would be fatal to himself and to his daughter.

Then he began to think once more of the terrible fate of the young girl who had been walled up, and whom he, the Grand Master, the chief of that terrible association of conspirators, had unhesitatingly sentenced to death ; and as he thought of her he wept bitterly, strong-minded though he was.

He wept for Zenobia's unfortunate niece, who had fallen a victim to an error for which he bitterly reproached himself, and for the first time in his life he cursed the political passions which had led to the immolation of an innocent victim.

Political fanaticism now filled the once stern conspirator with horror, and he acknowledged in his own heart that no cause was holy and just enough to warrant the taking away of a human life.

Then the idea of expiation returned to his mind. It had come to him once before, in the cavern at Montmartre, and, indeed, at the moment of the catastrophe by which Trimoulac, Saint-Privat, and his acolytes had perished, he had at first thought that heaven was punishing him.

He now felt that the expiation had but begun, and he bowed to it without a murmur ; but he trembled lest the divine vengeance should also fall upon his daughter. And, indeed, had it not already fallen upon her, as the loss of the colonel's will would ruin her betrothed ?

What would Lucien Bellefond say, on being set free, when he learnt that it was Vernède's conduct as Grand Master that had led to the loss of his fortune ?

The more the unfortunate banker pondered upon the situation of affairs, the more plainly did he realise that there was but one issue to it—a fatal one.

The impossibility of confiding his tortures to a friend increased his anguish. Machefer was the only man to whom he could open his heart ; but since that momentous expedition to the quarry at Montmartre he had not seen him.

No doubt the provision dealer was busy at his shop ; and it was quite possible that the easy-going old fellow did not care to see Vernède, for fear of being worried with lamentations which he no doubt foresaw. Such, at all events, was the banker's idea.

It would have been easy enough to repair to the Rue du Jour ; but the whilom Grand Master of the masons was in that state of

despair, mingled with indifference, in which a man does not attempt to struggle any longer against his fate, but suffers chance to bear him along as though it were a runaway horse carrying him at full speed towards a precipice.

He had now made up his mind as to the end, but before bringing it about, he wished to see the only person to whom he thought himself called upon to render an account.

That person was his daughter, his dear Thérèse, who had lately spent the greater part of her time in her own room, and whom he had not seen all day. Her sole companion now was the little humpback, with whom she talked unceasingly of Lucien. However, she had derived no comfort from Æsop's visit to the Marquis de Baffey, for the lad had taken care not to tell her about it.

He feared that she might find fault with him for having acted so boldly without her authorisation, and although, when he saw his dear protectress's tears fall, he said to himself that the only means of consoling her would be to tell her that one of the king's officers, a great nobleman, had promised to ask for Lucien's pardon, he did not dare to do so, so great was his timidity.

On that 10th of September, the day before that when the sum deposited with Vernède by the Marquis de Baffey had to be paid, the banker's daughter was even sadder than usual. Not because she knew of the misfortune which threatened her father, for she was ignorant of the precise facts, but this day had gone by like so many others, without her beloved prisoner giving any signs of life, and she was beginning to despair of ever seeing him again.

Little Æsop, who was sitting on a stool at her feet, and holding a skein of silk for her to wind, thought to himself that the effect of his appeal to the old countess's handsome nephew was very long in manifesting itself. In his childish way he had imagined that it would suffice if the marquis spoke for the doors of Lucien's prison to fly open.

All at once the lieutenant's betrothed ceased winding up the silk and let it fall. Her eyes, which were turned towards the open window, were filled with tears.

"Why do you weep, mademoiselle?" asked the little humpback.

"He gave me those flowers—those flowers on the windowsill," replied the young girl, "a year ago, on my birthday. They still live, but his love may be dead; they still live, but Lucien may not be alive in another month, and on my birthday he will not be here to congratulate me."

"Yes, he will, I'm sure, mademoiselle," replied Æsop, speaking with unusual earnestness.

Thérèse looked at him with surprise, and added: "No, I shall never see him again. This new government shows no pity to those who dare to oppose it."

"You will see him; I promise you that you will," rejoined Æsop, in the same earnest manner.

"What do you mean?" inquired Mademoiselle Vernède, half imagining that the lad had learnt some good news.

The humpback hesitated for an instant, then making up his mind all at once, he fell upon his knees, and joining his hands, exclaimed, in a pleading voice:

"Forgive me, mademoiselle; forgive me. I ought to have told you about it beforehand, and asked your permission; but seeing you so very sad, I thought that it would be right to——"

"What have you done?" interrupted Thérèse, excited and rendered anxious by this preamble.

"Why, I knew, mademoiselle, that Monsieur Lucien had saved a great nobleman who had met with an accident," replied the lad, "I heard what Monsieur Machefer told you about that marquis who lives in the Rue de Varennes——"

"What! Monsieur de Baffey?"

"Yes, mademoiselle, and I thought that the marquis, if he had any feeling, would not refuse to interest himself about Monsieur Bellefond. I felt sure, too, that if he asked for a pardon for him he would get it."

"Did you see him and speak with him?" inquired Thérèse, whose heart was beating fast.

"Yes," stammered the poor child. "I saw him—his servants were going to drive me away, but he came to the door of the house and called me. Then I had the courage to make an appeal to him—he listened to me, and——"

"Go on!" exclaimed Mademoiselle Vernède, who was all impatient to know the finish.

"Well, he told me, mademoiselle, that in three days' time he would come to bring you the answer."

"To me?—I will not see him! I will not see him!" exclaimed Thérèse, who was greatly agitated by this unexpected confession.

A moment's silence ensued. Æsop was hanging down his head, as if in fault. Then all at once Thérèse asked him: "Did you say that I had sent you?"

"Yes," murmured the humpback, who had kept back this part of his story—the most difficult to tell.

"You did very wrong!" exclaimed the young girl, angrily, stamping her foot, and flushing crimson.

"Oh! mademoiselle," pleaded little Æsop, "if you only knew how kind he was, how gently he spoke to me, although he must have taken a poor-looking creature as I am for a beggar. Yes, I am sure that his answer will be that he has succeeded in getting Monsieur Lucien released from prison."

"If I could only believe that!" muttered the young girl, who was a prey to conflicting thoughts.

"You may believe it, mademoiselle, he is good, I saw that; and powerful, too, I'm sure of it. His house is like a palace; and, besides,

there was an old lady there who was going to get into a splendid carriage, and she also promised——”

“Promised you?”

“No, she promised a young lady who had come like me to ask for the prisoner’s release.”

“A young lady!” gasped Mademoiselle Vernède, turning extremely pale.

“Yes, mademoiselle; a young lady who had a man with her. It was that man who is the doorkeeper of the house in the Rue d’Enfer—the one who shut me up in the cellar there.”

“Ah! I knew very well that it was a woman who kept him away when he was wounded!” exclaimed Thérèse, in a sorrowful tone.

“My presentiments did not deceive me.”

“Well, she said to the great lady that her father did not know that she had come to ask her to help Lieutenant Bellefond.”

“And you say that the old lady listened to her and then promised her——”

“She mentioned several names that I had never heard before, and talked about a number of things that I didn’t understand; but she said at last: ‘I will speak to Fouché about the matter. He’ll settle it.’ I remember that very well.”

“In that case,” said Thérèse, with marked bitterness, “if I see him again I shall owe my happiness to a rival!”

Æsop was now beginning to understand that he had better have held his tongue, and he was just about to try and justify himself when, hearing a footstep outside the door, he rose from his knees in haste.

It was Vernède who entered.

His face was sad, but he had such an amount of control over himself that Thérèse, who was accustomed to see him looking serious, did not guess what gloomy thoughts filled his mind. Rising from her chair she went up to him, and kissed him affectionately upon the brow.

“Leave us, my boy,” said the banker, turning to Æsop, who went away at once.

The poor little fellow was only too glad to escape from the embarrassment into which his indiscretion had thrown him.

“Thérèse, my dear, I must have a serious conversation with you,” said the banker.

The young girl’s first impulse had been to throw her arms around her father’s neck and inform him of what the humpback had told her; but, seeing him so stern and thoughtful, she had not the courage to speak out.

She felt as though her sobs would choke her if she attempted to do so.

“You know, my dear child,” resumed Vernède, sitting down, “that I have lately met with some very heavy losses. I mentioned the matter to you before.”

Thérèse made a gesture expressive of complete indifference.

"I am aware that you do not care for money," added the banker, trying to smile.

"I care very little for it," was Thérèse's answer.

"All the same, you must certainly feel an interest in my honour as a business man."

"Oh! father, can you doubt that?" exclaimed the young girl, forgetting her own grief.

"Heaven forbid, my child. If I speak to you about my financial embarrassments, it is because I wish to explain to you the purpose of the journey that I am about to take."

"What! are you going away?" asked the young girl, who was extremely surprised.

"Yes, my dear Thérèse," answered Vernède, trying to steady his voice and assume a less downcast air. "I must go to England on business of the utmost importance. I must collect a large amount of money which is due to me by a merchant in London, and I shall certainly lose it if I do not go after it myself."

"Indeed, how sorry I am to hear that you must go," said Thérèse.

"Oh, my presence is indispensable—it is urgent, moreover, that I should go at once, and accordingly I shall start to-morrow morning."

"To-morrow morning?"

"Yes; I must go then."

"Will you stay away long, father?" asked Thérèse, still greatly surprised by this communication.

"I do not as yet know how long I shall be detained; but I may be obliged to remain longer than I expect, and I must make arrangements in case I should not be able to return for some weeks."

"For so long as that?" remarked the young girl.

"Yes, unfortunately," answered Vernède, with a sigh. "However, I have so settled matters that you will not be too lonely in my absence."

In speaking these last words, the banker's voice shook despite all his efforts; however, he soon controlled himself once more, and resumed, with tolerable calmness: "You cannot remain in this house."

"Why not, father?"

"Why, an old servant and a lad are not sufficient protection for a young girl. That being the case, I have thought of a plan which will meet with your approval, I think. My old friend Machefer is of a proper age to take my place as regards you, and be a father to you; so I wish you to go and stay in the Rue du Jour during my absence, in a room that you know very well."

"Father, I will do as you wish," replied Thérèse. "As you are going away for a time, I think that what you suggest would be the most fitting course."

"Thanks, my child. I thought that the suggestion would suit you. Well, I am going to see Machefer to-day, and I will arrange

with him for you to stay at his house, together with the little lad whom you are so fond of, and I am sure that it will please him. But I have something else to ask."

"What is it?"

"I wish you to make me a promise," replied the banker, in an impressive voice.

"A promise?"

"Yes, a promise that you will not object to keep, Thérèse," resumed Vernède. "Promise me that you will marry our poor friend, Lucien Bellefond."

"Lucien!" repeated the young girl.

"Oh, I know what you will say," exclaimed the banker, speaking rapidly, as if he wished to bring the interview to a speedy termination. "You will say that he is not here, and that when he returns he may have changed, and that he must ask you to marry him before you can do so. But that is all girlish talk, my child. You are as sure of Lucien's love as I am of the fact that he will soon be set at liberty."

"Heaven grant it, but——"

"There are no *buts*," interrupted Thomas Vernède, fondly pressing his poor daughter to his heart. "Promise me, my dearest, that you will be his wife."

"I promise you, father," replied Thérèse, in a soft voice, "that I will never marry any one else, and that I will marry him, providing he still cares for me."

"If he still cares for you! What nonsense! Can any one doubt Lucien's love for you?"

Before Thérèse could reply, a gentle knock was heard at the door.

The banker opened it, and found himself face to face with his cashier, who apologised for disturbing his employer, but assured him that his presence in the office was indispensable, as he must sign the letters that were about to be taken to the post.

"Very good. I'll come at once," said the banker to his cashier.

Thereupon he kissed Thérèse even more tenderly than usual, and went away, happy in being able to curtail his explanations, but scarcely able to keep from weeping.

He had a dread purpose in his mind!

XXI.

ON the following day, at daylight, Thomas Vernède was seated at his desk in the dim little office of the Rue des Bourdonnais, where three-fourths of his life had been spent.

He had passed the whole night in writing. Long sheets of paper covered with figures, and several letters which he had already sealed up, showed that many wakeful hours had been spent in toil.

After bidding Thérèse farewell on the day before, he had not had the courage to see her again. In fact, upon the pretext that he was obliged to have an interview with one of his correspondents he had gone out as soon as his office was closed.

He then wandered about Paris till a late hour of the night, absorbed in gloomy thoughts, picturing the whole of his past life ; his modest circumstances at the outset of his career ; the tragic death of his parents ; the Revolutionary scenes which he had witnessed and taken part in ; the country in danger ; the march of the shoeless defenders of France to the frontier ; the guillotine reared on the Place de la Révolution, and the batches of condemned prisoners who mounted the fatal steps day by day ; then the easier times of the Directory ; his own accession to comparative affluence ; Bonaparte's brutal assumption of authority ; and the foundation of the Society of the Brethren of the Plaster as a protest against the annihilation of liberty. Then there was that fatal scene in the quarry at Montmartre—the execution of an innocent victim. This especially dwelt in Vernède's mind as he restlessly roamed about that night ; do what he would he could not rid himself of the fatal remembrance.

At last, tired in the limbs, but with his head on fire, he returned to the Rue des Bourdonnais. When he entered the old house where his abode was situated he saw no light in his daughter's window, and concluded that she had retired to rest.

Then he shut himself up to write to her, to Machefer, and to Lucien Bellefond, all those whom he loved. He wished to indite some parting words before he died.

For Thomas Vernède, now on the eve of bankruptcy, had fully made up his mind to kill himself.

Life, which he had been willing to face in poverty, he did not dare to face in disgrace.

His mind shrunk from a cowardly compromise. He could not brook the thought of enduring the slightest suspicion or humiliation.

He had been trained to the philosophical beliefs of the eighteenth

century, the ideas of the Rousseaus, the Voltaires, the Diderots, and the Condorcets ; and, now that he was ruined and degraded in his own eyes, he saw no refuge but suicide from the terrible catastrophe that threatened him.

He lacked the religious faith which might have consoled and sustained another, and he reasoned much in the same fashion as a Roman of the time of the Cæsars would have done.

He did not argue with himself that voluntary death, although it may be some expiation for an error—a transgression, does not by any means repair it, and he did not admit that there is more courage in living and striving to raise one's self again by suffering than in flying to the grave for shelter from sorrow or shame.

The idea of leaving Thérèse alone and without a protector had at first made him hesitate, but he firmly believed that he had secured her future happiness by leaving her temporarily in the care of Machefer, and by reminding Lucien that the unfortunate girl had no one but him to look to, and no hope but that of uniting her destiny with his. Both Machefer and Lucien, he felt certain, would nobly carry out the trust reposed in them.

As for himself, he wished to end his days before the Marquis de Baffey appeared to ask for the money which belonged to him, and which he (Vernède) was now unable to refund.

The office opened every morning punctually at nine o'clock. The banker had allowed himself till half-past eight, and the half hour had just that moment struck.

He had finished writing in a firm hand such instructions as he wished to leave to his cashier, and he rose up from his arm-chair to take his pistols from the wall, where they were hanging above a sword which he had worn during the Revolution, when he was wont to attend the Jacobin Club.

He had placed the pistols there on his return from the recent fatal expedition to the quarry at Montmartre. Now, however, on examining them he saw that the powder was damp, and that the rain which had poured in torrents that night had rusted the weapons to such an extent that they could not be used.

He had not time to clean them, for his pitiless creditor might appear at any moment. What should he do?

As he stood there reflecting, his eyes suddenly fell upon the drawer in which he had placed the pistols which had been taken from Virginie Lasbaysses, when she was apprehended by the masons at the little house on the Chaussée de Clignancourt.

Lucien Bellefond had seen them in that same drawer, but without recognising them, on the day when he had come to ask for Thérèse's hand, and when the banker had told him that he was ruined ; they were still there, and seemed to be fitting instruments of punishment.

"They are in perfect order," said Vernède, bitterly. "I killed their owner, and now they will kill me. Heaven is just !"

Then going to the drawer he opened it and took out one of the weapons. Using the rod he at once ascertained that the pistol was loaded. As a precaution, however, he removed the cap and filled the pan with fresh powder. He did not wish to miss fire.

Still, before ending his life, he wanted once more to think of his dear child, and he now laid the pistol upon the table.

Some moments passed thus. All would have been silent, but for the sobs of the once inflexible leader of the masons, who was now weeping bitterly. One might have thought, perhaps, that strength of mind failed him to effect his purpose. But no ; for he presently wiped away the tears that streamed down his pale cheeks, and boldly stood up, saying : " It is time."

And, as he made ready to fire, he added : " That proud nobleman will soon be here. I can see his haughty face before me now, and hear the insolently-polite words that his disdainful lips will utter as he presents the note which is the cause of my death. However, he will find nothing here but my dead body."

Speaking these last words, Vernède firmly raised the pistol to his head.

The charge took fire, but the pistol did not go off.

" It is my destiny to bear every form of anguish ! " said Vernède, as he lowered his weapon again.

However brave a man my be, he cannot face death without experiencing some emotion, even when he is bent on self-destruction.

Thérèse's father had turned very pale ; and he now placed his hand upon his wildly beating heart, as if to stay its rapid pulsations.

" Did I spare that poor girl who brought Lucien a fortune—did I spare her any of the horrors of an atrocious death ? " he muttered. " No, I must not hesitate."

Then he seized the other pistol, but he saw that it was empty. Virginie had no doubt fancied that one loaded weapon would suffice for her protection.

Vernède at once set to work to load this second pistol, but found that his own bullets were too large to go into it. It seemed as though everything conspired to prevent him from killing himself.

Any other man, in his place, would have thought this to be an interposition of heaven.

But Thomas Vernède was a man of marble—free of all superstitious feeling.

Three of the pistols at hand were quite useless to enable him to carry out his determination. So he took up the fourth one, that which had already missed fire, and began to examine it, saying to himself with increased bitterness :

" At the worst, I have still my sword left to kill myself with."

He first examined the priming-pan. The powder he found was all burnt, but he now noticed with surprise that the touch-hole was not stopped up, as he had supposed. He then thought that the

charge must have become damp, although the pistol had been kept in a drawer.

His only resource was to take out the charge and reload the weapon with some dry powder and the same ball, which must be of the right size, as it was already in the barrel.

Acting on this determination, he took up a worm-screw, and began to unload the pistol. However, the steel teeth of the instrument soon came in contact with some paper, which resisted Vernède's endeavours to remove it from the barrel.

He involuntarily said to himself that poor Virginie could not have understood much about firearms, and he was wondering what she could have used to load this pistol, when, to his amazement, he found that his worm-screw was dragging out a roll of parchment.

At this he quivered from head to foot.

He hastily threw the pistol upon the table, and then began to unroll the parchment, but his feverish hands trembled so much that he could scarcely hold it.

What could this paper be which Zenobia Capitaine's niece had hidden in so strange a place? He did not know, and yet a feeling of hope had at last dawned upon his mind. He was like a shipwrecked man in mid-ocean who sees a ship afar off on the horizon.

At length he was able to unroll the parchment, and he then saw that it enclosed a yellowish strip of paper. He unfolded the latter, and as he did so, a cry escaped him.

"The colonel's will!"

For a moment or two he remained spell-bound; awed, as it were, by this singular discovery. Then with dim eyes he tremulously read these lines, written by the brave soldier, who had died of the wounds he had received at the battle of the Berezina:

"MILITARY HOSPITAL AT SMOLENSK,
5th Dec., 1812.

"Being mortally wounded, and about to appear before God, but still retaining the full exercise of my faculties, I hereby, of my own free will, appoint my nephew by marriage, Lucien Bellefond, the son of my wife's sister, and a sub-lieutenant in the 9th Light Cavalry, Mermel division, in the Army of Portugal, as my sole heir. I desire him to pay an annuity of five thousand francs a year to Zenobia Capitaine, a sutler-woman in the 19th Regiment of Artillery, which I command, in return for the devotion that she has shown me at all times. I confide this will to her that she may transmit it to my heir.

"PIERRE LACAUSSE,DE,

Colonel of Artillery, and Commander of the Legion of Honour."

"Heaven has ordained a miracle!" said Thomas Vernède, as he finished his perusal.

Lucien was now rich. His betrothed, who would become his wife, need no longer fear poverty.

Thus Vernède could die in peace.

His involuntary crime was in a measure expiated, as Colonel Lacaussade's last wishes would now be fulfilled. However, Vernède still wished to punish himself for his transgression with death, and he stretched out his hand to take his sword from the wall, for this was now the only available weapon, the pistol which contained the parchment having no bullet inside it. At that moment, however, some one knocked at the door.

At this sound, which announced the coming of a visitor, Vernède started like a man awaking from a dream.

He looked at the clock and saw that he had let the time pass by. His fruitless preparations had lasted more than half-an-hour. It was already past nine o'clock. The office doors must have been opened, and it was, perhaps, the Marquis de Baffey who had just knocked.

Vernède might, if he pleased, refuse to open the door, and proceed with his mournful preparations—even kill himself while his enemy was trying to get in.

But the person who had just knocked might be his clerk, or even Thérèse, and he shrunk from the thought of letting the poor girl see his bloody corpse lying upon the floor.

He was appalled by the idea of letting her witness such a sight, and he therefore resolved to put off the fatal moment for a while. Walking towards the door, he unbolted it and flung it open. But it was not Thérèse who stood upon the threshold, nor was it even the little short-sighted, timid cashier.

Vernède, in lieu of either of these, beheld a man whom he did not recognise at first, so changed was he by suffering.

Disfigured, indeed, by the wound on his forehead, and blanched by illness, but still as upright and haughty as ever, Henry de Baffey politely removed his hat and entered.

"You have come, sir," said Vernède, turning pale with anger, as at last he recognised his dreaded visitor. "I expected you. I well knew that you would not delay enjoying your triumph for an instant. You have been waiting two months for it."

"What do you mean, sir?" asked the Marquis de Baffey, quietly.

This was too much for the banker. The cooler M. de Baffey seemed, the more exasperated he (Vernède) became.

"You know very well what I mean," said he. "This is the 11th of September; it is nine o'clock; my office is open. So you have come to claim the money that you deposited with me. There is no use in your denying it. You know such to be the case as well as I do. Well, be satisfied; I am not able to return you those three hundred thousand francs. I have made use of a part of the amount to meet business payments, and I must have time to make up the full amount, if, indeed, I can do so at all. You have a right to say that I have acted dishonestly. Make use of that right—do not spare me. Treat me as your ancestors used to treat mine."

Then, seeing that M. de Baffey remained motionless and silent,

with no legible expression upon his pale face, the banker lost all self-control.

"What are you waiting for?" said he, maddened by his visitor's coolness, "what keeps you from casting my shame in my teeth? Spurn me! Curse me! Upbraid me! You need not fear that I shall ask you for any reparation for your insults. A debtor cannot fight with his creditor—we all know that—and I owe you three hundred thousand francs. A noble only fights with his equal, and not only am I not a noble, but in the eyes of the world—in yours especially—I am now not even an honest man."

At these words the Marquis de Baffey, still perfectly unruffled, took an elegant pocket-book from his pocket, drew from it a stamped bond, and tore the latter into fragments, which, without a word, he flung upon the floor.

"Ah! I understand!" exclaimed Vernède, bitterly, "it is all very well for a man of the people to insult an enemy; a gentleman takes a more refined vengeance. Such is the result of good breeding and a patrician ancestry! You might reproach me for abusing your confidence, but you prefer to crush me with your scornful generosity. But no; I am mistaken. You are not so generous as all that. You came here intending to propose a bargain to me, did you not? My daughter for that bond, eh? It is really too much honour that you are doing me, and I ought to fall on my knees to thank you."

He paused at last, almost choking, for his feelings were too much for him.

"I see, sir," now said the marquis, coldly, "that your troubles have upset your mind. If I had entertained the odious purpose of which you accuse me, I should not have destroyed the receipt upon which such a plan would have been founded."

"Why not?" answered Vernède, scornfully. "Don't you know that my books show the debt? A merchant, a banker, as you must be well aware, is held liable in accordance with the entries in his ledger. Do you believe me to be duped by your pretended generosity?"

M. de Baffey started, but succeeded in controlling himself, and did not utter a word.

"Well, then," resumed the banker, who was beside himself with rage, "I take up the glove you have thrown down. The greater part of the money due to you is still in my safe. It shall be given to you at once. There are one hundred and seventy thousand francs, I should think. It has suited you to tear up the bond. All right. Now, however, you must sign a receipt for the money I will hand to you. If you refuse, I will force you to do so by law. The rest will soon be paid to you, and on the day when I am no longer your debtor, you will not refuse to fight with me, I trust—unless, indeed, you make your noble birth a pretext for not fighting with a man of the people."

"My nobility only recoils from base actions," replied the marquis, proudly raising his head.

"Then you will fight with me?" ejaculated Vernède. "Very well; I thank you! Whatever may be the result of our meeting, I shall not have to endure your insulting proposals. When a man has fought another, he cannot seek to marry that man's daughter."

"Do not be alarmed, sir," replied the officer of the Black Musketeers. "I have ceased wishing to marry Mademoiselle Vernède since I have known that she is betrothed to Monsieur Lucien Bellefond, who loves her, and whom she loves."

"Bellefond!" exclaimed the banker, again flying into a passion, "you dare to talk of Bellefond? Well, then, yes—you have named the man whom my daughter prefers, and whom she will marry, let the vile agents of the government which you serve condemn him or not to perpetual imprisonment; yes, even if the scoundrels who govern us have the infamy to send him to the scaffold—he will still marry her, ay, marry her at the foot of the guillotine! The brave soldier to whom Thérèse is betrothed is not a noble, thank heaven! While you were living in Germany or England, at the court of your king, he was fighting for France. Yes! For France—betrayed by the men who came back in the baggage waggons of the allies! And, what is more, since the Bourbons, in return for his valour, rewarded his services by depriving him of his position in the army, he saved your life. But for him you would have perished miserably upon a deserted highway! You might have remembered that?"

"I do not think that I have forgotten it," replied M. de Baffey, quietly.

"Indeed!" said Vernède, whom the unchangeable coolness of the marquis exasperated more and more. "You don't know, perhaps, that, after having removed you from the deserted spot where you would have died but for his help, Monsieur Bellefond was followed by a spy—one of those ignoble scamps who work for any master—royal, imperial, or republican—and he was arrested under the absurd pretext of having fought with a Prussian officer?"

"I am quite aware of that, sir."

"You knew it, then? Well, I ought to have guessed that you did," retorted Vernède, in an ironical tone of voice. You knew it, and you thought, no doubt with delight, that your Minister of the Police had rid you of a troublesome adversary or rival. Any other man, a man of the people like myself, would have gone to ask for the release of his enemy, if only to be on equal terms with him. You, however, are of a more practical turn of mind. You said to yourself that the arrest of my partner, who was about to become my son-in-law, would leave me without resources and also leave my daughter without a protector."

The royalist officer's eyes flashed, but he did not stir or break his disdainful silence.

"Well, in these pleasant surmises of yours you were mistaken, sir," resumed the banker. "I am here to defend my daughter, and Monsieur Bellefond, my partner, will now be able to keep the engagements which we entered into together, for he is rich, as rich as yourself."

"I am very pleased to hear it, sir,," replied the Marquis de Baffey, haughtily.

"And you may be sure," said Vernède, "that his imprisonment will not prevent him from helping me and marrying my daughter. Your party may be paramount, but harsh as your rule may be, your power does not, so far as I know, extend to the point of depriving a French citizen of his right of inheritance, and here is the will of a brave officer—a colonel of artillery—who died fighting your allies, the Russians, and this will makes Monsieur Lucien Bellefond, who is the colonel's nephew by marriage, the sole heir to a fortune of more than two millions of francs. This fortune is now his own, and he will soon have possession of it, for, however bitter our enemies may be, they cannot keep him in prison for ever on account of a duel."

With these words the banker again gave his adversary a defiant look.

"Especially as it was fairly and honourably conducted," replied the Marquis de Baffey. "Two English officers, who were the seconds of Monsieur Bellefond's antagonist, have formally stated that the code of honour was scrupulously complied with."

"Ah! then you admit it!" exclaimed the banker, delighted at having wrung this admission from his adversary; "you do not deny that he will be free some day, and then——"

"He is free now."

"What do you mean? What do you know about it?" asked Vernède, in utter astonishment.

"I mean," answered the Marquis de Baffey, in his cold but impressive voice; "I mean that I entreated the King to do justice to an officer who was accused of an imaginary crime, and that His Majesty, having made some inquiries with regard to Lieutenant Bellefond, was graciously pleased to give orders that he should be set at liberty. The order for his release was signed yesterday at an audience which His Majesty granted me at the Palace of the Tuileries."

"That is impossible!" exclaimed the banker. "Lucien would have come to me at once."

"I do not think that he will be long in coming," replied the marquis, smiling for the first time since the beginning of the interview.

Indeed, as he spoke a hurried step was heard in the outer office. Then suddenly the door was hastily re-opened, and Lucien threw himself into the arms of Thérèse's father.

Vernède pressed him warmly to his breast, but speedily dis-

engaging himself, he pointed to M. de Baffey with a gesture of interrogation.

The banker still doubted ; his plebeian pride was so great that it revolted against the evidence before him, overwhelming as it was.

The fact is, after owing his life and the discovery of the colonel's will to a miracle, he rebelled against the idea of owing Lucien's liberty to a nobleman. It seemed like the annihilation of all his principles—his firmly-set irreligious views, and his long-existent hatred of the aristocracy. And even if he bowed himself before the Providence that had so evidently interposed in the matter of the will, at least he longed to be able to remain erect and defiant in the presence of a scion of that nobility which he had so long detested.

Lucien, however, did not hesitate.

"Marquis," said he, in an agitated tone. "Thanks to your efforts I have been relieved from prison. I do not know whether you are still my enemy, but I am not yours, and I should be glad and proud to shake hands with you."

The officer of the Black Musketeers at once held out his hand to Lieutenant Bellefond, and then, offering the other to the banker, he said, with a sad smile, which bore, as it were, the trace of a vanished hope :

"Are you still angry with me for coming to see you?"

This was said so frankly and gracefully that Vernède no longer resisted. For the first time in his life he clasped the hand of one of those aristocrats of whom, in the Days of Terror, he had helped to send so many to the guillotine !

XXII.

AFTER the scene of reconciliation which took place on that morning of the 11th of September—that morning which had dawned so sadly, but which had so happy an end, Vernède had to thank heaven for holding him back from self-destruction.

Thérèse and Lucien also blessed Providence for its mercies, and their first thought was to offer up their prayers.

The following day was devoted to the generous man who had asked for and obtained the release of Lieutenant Bellefond. The situation was undoubtedly an embarrassing one as regards all three of the persons who had reason to be grateful to the Marquis de Baffey. It does not appear, however, that Thérèse was called upon to go and thank the suitor who had given up seeking her in marriage. She did not care to see him, much as she was pleased with his conduct; and finally it was arranged that she should not take any personal action in the matter.

Lucien also felt some embarrassment about expressing his gratitude to his rival, although he admitted that, without the powerful influence of the marquis, he might have remained in prison for a long time; and, indeed, had the traitor Cyrille spoken out, he would not have escaped with mere imprisonment. He also understood M. de Baffey's generosity in destroying the bond for the three hundred thousand francs, instead of turning it to account as regards Vernède's intentions concerning his daughter.

However, pride is the most unconquerable of all human passions. Others may be conquered or controlled, but this one exercises a mastery which can seldom be shaken off. If Lucien had been the loser in the struggle that had now ended, he would not have hesitated to go and thank his liberator. But he was the conqueror, and he did not like to go and thank the marquis in person. Such is the human heart, even when it is what we call a good one. Thus in the result Lucien contented himself with writing the marquis a letter in which, in tolerably fitting terms, he thanked him for his timely intervention.

However, among those whom Henri de Baffey had obliged, there was one who fully did his duty, painful as it was, and he was not the least proud, nor had he been the least humiliated. Thomas Vernède, however, for a time forgot that he had been a Jacobin, and remembered all that he owed to the aristocrat whom he had so fiercely hated.

The old Republican rightly considered that, without giving up his

life-long opinions, he might repair to the Countess des Orgeries' mansion in the Rue de Varennes ; and, indeed, he went there, and was glad to press once more the hand which the royalist officer had first held out to him at his office.

That day the whilom Grand Master of the "Brethren of the Trowel" showed that he was a man of a superior nature. He had transgressed more than once in the course of his long life. He had been exclusive in his opinions, stern and unrelenting as regards the furtherance of his political aims, but now, by willingly acknowledging his errors, he did much to atone for the events of the past.

It is superfluous to add that the marquis, who was a man of perfect breeding, received the banker, not only with the respect due to him, but with fitting regard for their mutual situation, showing him those delicate attentions which no longer prevail in French society, now that so much is said about the "rights of man."

The marquis, in spite of his cold manners, was really an enthusiast, and even an idealist, as the first Napoleon somewhat contemptuously called all those who allowed themselves to think and to feel. The great conqueror himself believed in action only.

Henri de Baffey reconciled his poetic tendencies with his English manners by going, some years later, to fight for Greece, in the company of his friend, Lord Byron ; and, like the latter, he was killed at Missolonghi. Then the old name of the Baffeys, famous since the days of the Crusades, glowing, as it did, on almost every page of French history, died out. Nought but the record of a long line of statesmen, warriors, and courtiers remained to attest the whilom power and splendour of one of the noblest families in Christendom.

The Countess des Orgeries, Henri's aunt, survived him, to her sorrow, and witnessed the downfall of the Bourbons of the elder branch, when King Charles X., misled by the advice of the narrow-minded, image-worshipping Prince de Polignac, was hurled from the throne by the latter-day disciples of that dear Jean Jacques Rousseau, whom she—Madame des Orgeries—had known so well and admired so much in the days when she was the belle of Versailles.

Fate was kinder to the Vernède family.

Money (whatever people may say against it) straightens all difficulties, and Lucien, now the heir to more than two millions of francs, did not need to wait to realise his uncle's property.

That credit which the unfortunate banker had lost was eagerly offered him as soon as it was known that his partner had inherited so large a fortune. Only the rich can borrow, says the proverb, and such indeed is the law here below.

Thus the formidable payments due at the end of September were met without any difficulty ; and two months later, M. de Baffey had received his money. The year 1816, moreover, enhanced the prosperity of the banking business of Messrs. Vernède and Bellefond.

But before then the betrothed couple were married. The wedding ceremony took place on the 15th of October, 1815, on Saint Thérèse's-day.

"I told you, mademoiselle, that you would have some flowers on your birthday, and handsomer ones than you had last year," remarked poor *Æsop*, when he saw the bridal wreath arrive.

The little humpback had had so much to do with the unexpected events to which the young couple owed their happiness, that they felt very grateful to him, and proved it in a substantial way.

However, there was some one else who deserved to be well remembered by the Vernède family. That was Zenobia Capitaine, who had brought the colonel's precious will from Russia. She was still in prison in Périgueux at the time when Thomas Vernède so miraculously found the missing will. However, it is necessary to say that Lucien Bellefond lost no time in negotiating for the release of the colonel's faithful envoy. Vernède personally applied to M. de Baffey, and the latter, setting to work again, thanks to his influence, the Minister of the Interior gave orders to the prefect of Dordogne to release the prisoner, against whom there was, in point of fact, no important charge.

Less than a week after the catastrophe in the quarry at Montmartre, Timoléon Machefer left Paris by coach, bound for Périgueux, and not with any suspicious persons on this occasion, for he had no Trimoulac-Loupjac or Saint-Privat-Bonnin to fear, as they had both gone to another world. Nor had he any reason, on this journey, to disguise his errand. His mission was now one that he could freely acknowledge, and there was no necessity for him to pretend that he was going to purchase a large supply of those invigorating esculents—the far-famed truffles of Périgord.

During the following week he brought back the sutler-woman in triumph, for she had made no difficulty about leaving Périgueux, nor did it take her long to get ready to start for Paris.

Zenobia had travelled all over Europe during the previous fifteen years, and she knew how to get ready in very little time. She left her native city just as she had been wont to break up camp, when she followed the grand army on its conquering pilgrimage through the continent; and she did not experience any regret in turning her back upon the truffle capital; for she cared but little for the relatives whom she left behind her there.

It may well be imagined that she was warmly received by Lucien and his new family. Still, this much-desired meeting brought up very sad recollections.

The lamentable story of Virginie Lasbaysses had already been made known to Zenobia by Machefer, and the good woman could not allude without tears to the fate of the courageous girl, who had devoted herself to the task of delivering the will to the lieutenant, and had lost her life in the attempt.

Zenobia was in a position to supply various details which enabled

her friends to understand the more mysterious part of what had occurred, leading to the tragic result with which they were well acquainted.

It appeared from Zenobia's narrative that, after receiving the forged letter which the vile Trimoulac had had the audacity to sign with Bellefond's name, the aunt and the niece had consulted and made a plan.

This plan was to the effect that Virginie should dress herself as a man, and thus start for Paris, it being understood that nobody should be made acquainted with her intention.

Accordingly, when the young girl had donned her masculine disguise she went to wait for the mail-coach at some distance from the town, and no one saw her leave.

It was she who, in her aunt's name, had written the letter which had been addressed to Lucien Bellefond, and opened by the spying director of the dark room. It was she, too, who had read Zenobia the false letter from Trimoulac signed with Lucien's name.

Upon leaving Périgueux, she had told Zenobia that she would surely be able to find the house in Paris which the letter spoke of, and that she would hide the will in such a way that Lucien's enemies would never be able to steal it. Unfortunately, however, that was all that she had said. She had not even written on her arrival in the capital ; and ever since bidding her God-speed, Zenobia had been left in a state of anxious suspense.

If the sutler-woman had known that the will had been secreted in one of the pistols that her niece was carrying in her pockets, she would certainly have told this to Machefer when he went to see her in prison ; Machefer, on his return, would have acquainted Vernède with the circumstance, and Vernède, in his turn, would not have taken that dangerous journey to the quarries, nor on the morrow have attempted to blow out his brains.

The information that Zenobia was able to impart went no further than this, but the three friends had no difficulty in guessing what had subsequently occurred.

Virginie Lasbaysses had gone to Paris ; and had there inquired the way to the Chaussée de Clignancourt, where she believed that Lucien Bellefond was awaiting her in a house which the spurious letter specified.

She reached this house ; she found the doors open ; but the place was empty.

The Chevalier de Loupiac had been there, indeed, a few moments before and had gone away, intending to return very soon, as he had left the keys in the doors and a lighted lamp on the table of a room on the ground-floor.

Virginie bravely entered this room, and finding and seeing no one there, she had at once concluded that Lucien had been obliged to go away a few moments previously, and would speedily return.

She had therefore seated herself at the table, and had laid her pistols down beside the lamp; for, being unaccustomed to carrying such things about her person, she had found them somewhat in her way.

Then at last, weary of waiting, she had become anxious and impatient, wondering what it all meant. And finally she had taken the idea of writing to the governor of Paris, asking him to tell her where she would find Lieutenant Bellefond, for she had begun to doubt whether this house were really his abode. Then the masons came upon her at the very moment when she was writing the first words of her missive.

That fatal letter had contributed to doom her to death, for the Grand Master had conjectured that it was intended for the Minister of Police instead of the military Governor of Paris. The conspirators had made a fatal mistake in meting out their "justice," and the frightful consequences of the error were beyond repair.

Virginie Lasbaysses was sincerely lamented, as she deserved to be, and Thérèse, prompted by a pious feeling, placed a cross outside the Butte Montmartre, which was her tomb.

Æsop was taken by Machefer into his employ, and finally, as time went on, he took the place of Frantz, the old cashier, who had to retire on account of his failing sight. Indeed, in the course of time, when Machefer retired, it was Æsop who took over the business.

As for the fair Clarisse, she consoled herself more easily for the disappearance of her respectable parent than for Lucien's marriage. And yet the disappearance of that nice old gentleman, M. Bonnin, furnished during a time matter for no little comment between his daughter, his housekeeper, and Carrots. None of them could understand what had become of him; and, as he had left in the company of the wary Cornillon and the strong-armed Bourdache, neither of whom, moreover, had ever returned, he ought to have been in a position to defend himself against any attack. Madame Boutard was aware that the trio had started on some expedition concerning the missing will, but she had not been made acquainted with their precise destination. After a while they were forgotten, all efforts to find any traces of them having proved unavailing.

They still sleep within the height of Montmartre, and some day it may happen that workmen, engaged in digging the foundations of a house, will come upon their bones, lying near those of the muscular Tranquebar and the scoundrelly Trimoulac—the latter of whom was mourned for a brief season by Zoé de Sainte-Gauburge.

But, to return to Clarisse, art at last enabled her to forget the impression which Lucien Bellefond's manly comeliness had made upon her susceptible nature. After vainly trying to become a painter, she took up music, and, by the advice of Madame Boutard, the former Goddess of Reason, she came out during the following year at the Théâtre des Nouveautés, and obtained a success with which it was said, however, her beauty had a great deal to do.

As for the sutler-woman, who has given her name to this veracious narrative, she had fairly earned the colonel's legacy and a quiet life. She found one in the house of the two partners, who, thanks to Providence, had now no need to ask : "Where's Zenobia ?"

Lucien and Thérèse lived long and happily after the dramatic events which we have described ; and there is no reason for us to relate what happened to them during the years that followed. It is only misfortune that leaves a record—happiness has no history.

END OF "WHERE'S ZENOBIA ?"

THE NECKLACE.



I.

It was the first day a ray of sunshine had fallen on Paris for many weeks, one of those rare days when the air is so diaphanous, the sky so pure, that it seems as if there were happiness in the world for everybody—one of those blessed days, indeed, when there are no longer any rich nor any poor, when there is neither luxury nor poverty, nothing but human beings whose sole desire is to have their share in the Spring. Thus all Paris betook itself to the railway stations, of which that in the Rue Saint-Lazare was not the least crowded. Horses and people were hastening towards it, bringing new recruits to the feast of the sun. Those who, from the top of the flight of steps, were looking at this joyous sight while awaiting the opening of the ticket offices, remarked an elegant victoria which came up at a fast trot and suddenly stopped in front of the steps. A slenderly-formed young woman alighted from this vehicle, went towards the ticket-office, and then continued on her way to the waiting-room, leaving behind her the noise of rustling silk.

The bell rung as the signal for departure just at that moment.

“Open the door, I beg of you! Open it!” said the young woman, knocking on the door, which a railway inspector shut in her face.

A shrill whistle announced to her that her persistence had become useless. The train had started. Then, like a bird in a cage, the charming woman began to walk up and down the waiting-room, which had become almost deserted. Her small, narrow, well-shaped feet tapped the floor impatiently, as though she were anxious to make it aware of the unheard-of mischance which had befallen her.

In spite of the rather exaggerated coquetry of this pretty woman, her brisk and audacious step, one recognised by her haughty manner, and the straight line of her brows, which were slightly contracted, the insolent self-confidence of a patrician. Her toilette, wonderfully elegant, was albeit slightly conspicuous, as if indeed she feared to pass unobserved. Under her almost imperceptible bonnet the bright red of a spray of fuchsias relieved the golden hue of her hair, playing in little loose curls on her brow. The brilliancy of her eyes and the rosy tint of her complexion completed a most charming picture.

The waiting-room had begun to fill again, but the young woman continued her walk without caring for the eye-glasses that were examining her, when all at once a faint perfume that suddenly filled the air, and a cadenced rustle of trailing skirts—a rhythmed echo of her own—attracted her attention.

It is certain that the entrance of a woman into a drawing-room has a more serious interest for the feminine guests than it has for you, dear reader of the sterner sex, or for me. At the rival's approach weary looks suddenly brighten up, mouths are curved into a malicious smile, drooping forms are drawn up : like a horseman upright in his stirrups, and making ready to charge the enemy, thus indifferent beauties become animated in presence of a struggle.

"Marthe !" exclaimed a lady who had now entered the waiting-room.

"Lucie !" answered the young woman who had missed the train.

And four of the handsomest eyes in the world shone with a joyful surprise. At first only a duet of silvery notes mingling together was heard :

"How pretty you are !"

"And you, too !"

"How ungrateful you have been !"

"Dear Marthe !"

And a pair of black eyes were fixed on a pair of blue ones with as much curiosity as pleasure.

"Have I not looked enough for you ? Yes, indeed. Marthe could not console herself for Lucie's departure. But meanwhile, mademoiselle got married without giving any warning, and went off, heaven knows where, on her honeymoon. However, suppose we kiss each other ?"

"Here ?"

"Why not ?"

The young woman to whom these words were addressed was of a different style of beauty to her friend. The outline of her small nose bespoke pride. One's look was attracted to the pearly whiteness of her complexion, full of soft, tender lights ; to a childish mouth, an oval face, accompanied by a wealth of chestnut-coloured hair. She was youth in its bloom, although a slight dark circle surrounded her eyes. She had a round figure, delicately-formed wrists and ankles, and her toilette was exquisitely simple, without the least mark of eccentricity. Withal she wore an air of reserve and timidity.

"Ah ! where did you hide yourself, madame ?" continued the mischievous Marthe. "Oh, you need not blush. I know what it is. But our honeymoon only lasted the proper time. Three months of forced seclusion. It is nice—but it is enough. At the bottom of his heart my husband thought as I did. He has all my faults. You will see him, he is splendidly ugly. And yours ? Have you taken the archangel Saint Michael from his niche ? You know that copy of

Raphael with which we were all in love? Don't be uneasy, if he has brown hair I won't tell him of it——"

"Do you always make fun of everything?"

"More than ever. Ah! there is my brother. See, over there, that man with an open waistcoat and his moustache turned up. He does not dare to come here. Is he not absurd with his solemn looks? But, now I think of it, he will be furious."

"Furious? Why?"

"Because I promised you to him; don't you remember it? George, my brother George, whom I intended you to marry? But you look pre-occupied. Are you waiting for your husband?"

"Yes."

"I am dying to make his acquaintance to overwhelm him with reproaches. Ah, the jealous fellow! Does he think he is going to monopolise you? Ah! there is the train now. I must be off. Quick! give me your address. Mine is 50 Boulevard Malesherbes. Oh! lucky chance, without that second's delay, who knows if we should ever have found each other again? I bless that inspector who wouldn't let me pass. Ah! here's my brother. George, I want to present you to my friend Lucie. You remember Lucie?"

Then turning towards her friend:

"You frighten my brother. It seems he finds you grown. Come and see me on Wednesday, my dear, that's my day—it is agreed, eh?"

II.

ABOUT a fortnight after this meeting, Lucie de Sudres was announced at the Countess du Plessy's house. The two young women were to breakfast together. Lucie found the little countess still nestled in her blue satin bed; a ball-dress was spread over the ottoman; a box of pearl powder stood open; a bouquet of white lilac still exhaled its sweet perfume. Jewels and pearls, ribbons and laces formed a bright heap on the little desk. The room was a perfect chaos; amid the hangings of silk and guipure one perceived bits of brilliant carved furniture, jewels, faïences, bronzes, and enamels.

This elegant disorder made a singular impression on Lucie. In the presence of this luxurious comfort, her own room, hung with simple chintz, appeared to her disagreeably mean with its simple characteristics.

"I am really ashamed to be still a-bed!" exclaimed Marthe, stretching her arms. "Will you ring, dearest?"

A maid appeared almost immediately, carrying a pink silk wrapper bordered with fur, into which the pretty, sleepy woman slipped like a cat, while pointing to two large well-padded arm-chairs, covered with some silken material, which the maid rolled in front of the fire-place.

Then between the two friends there began one of these desultory conversations, of which women alone possess the secret.

"Ah!" said Marthe, suddenly, "what toilet are you going to wear at my ball?"

Lucie began to laugh.

"Obstinate child! I have already told you that I do not go into society," said she.

"You will come to my entertainment. If it is necessary, I will go and throw myself at the feet of the great master."

"Oh! don't do that, above all things. Léonce might think that I wished it!"

"Great harm there would be in that!"

"Because he would yield."

"I rely upon his doing so."

"But I do not wish it."

"Your reasons, please?"

"I mistrust myself. I feel that I could love society and its pleasures madly, and that if I once tasted of them I should not know how to stop."

"And why should you stop?"

"You reason like a little countess who has a hundred thousand francs a year. But the wife of an ill-paid functionary, without any fortune, should think, and above all, act differently."

"It is singular; you used only to sketch out golden dreams. How did you happen to marry a man without any money? For I remember all the fairy tales of your imagination. How many times you used to astonish us at the convent with the fantastic descriptions of the splendours of your future home!"

"Dear me! it is very simple. I loved Léonce."

"That reason is as good as any other," said the countess, smiling; "but let us return to my ball."

"Well, you will tell Léonce that you exacted it of me."

"That will be the truth."

"But, above all, never speak to him of my school fancies. He would be so unhappy to know that I had any tastes that it would be impossible for him to satisfy."

"From all this I gather that your husband has placed you in a niche, and that the saint holds to her pedestal! I, on the contrary, tell Max everything that comes into my mind. Yes, all! And I don't hide the *great* sins under the *little ones*, as you used to do with our good father confessor. In a word, he is obliged to love me, because—in fact, in spite of everything!"

At the breakfast this grave discussion was continued.

III.

LÉONCE DE SUDRES, Lucie's husband, was far from being handsome, like little Baron George, Marthe's brother, and although he did not possess the "splendid ugliness" of the countess's better-half, and did

not in anywise resemble the archangel Saint Michael—the young woman's first ideal—he was nevertheless a very desirable husband. He possessed, it is true, rather the robust vigour of a provincial than the elegant masher manners of a Parisian. His broad shoulders were surmounted by a curly brown head and smiling face, all the features of which were expressive of good health, a good conscience, and good humour. Moreover, his mind was cultivated. Brought up in the country by his somewhat austere father until he entered the Polytechnic School, he had retained modest habits and studious tastes. If he was not a stranger to pleasure during his sojourn in Paris, at least he lived there in such a way as never to know the sad boredom of satiety. Besides, a sweet and charming memory served him as a shield; a child whom he had almost rocked in her cradle, and whom he dreamed of making his life's companion: this was Lucie, who, educated at a convent in Paris, had returned home at about the same time as he was appointed civil engineer.

Léonce only possessing his salary, and Lucie having merely an income of a few thousand francs as her dowry, their union had met with serious opposition from their parents. But obstacles fell before their love and before their reasonable plans. "They would live retired; far away from society and its costly obligations; they would resist all temptation in the way of pleasure and vanity. Lucie was so pretty, did she need any setting off to her beauty? Léonce was so charming, why should his wife seek aught beyond the happiness she was sure to find in her own home!"

They were married. Circumstances, however, soon wrought a change in the modest plans formed by the young couple. After a short stay in the country, Léonce was called to a post in Paris. This post, which would have been so enviable a one for many others, upset Léonce's plans for a retired life, and when the young people left for the capital they prayed for a speedy return to the provinces.

They took an apartment in the Avenue de Neuilly, outside the city. Thus only distant sounds of society would reach them; they would still live, so to speak, in the country.

Faithful in every way to the programme they had traced out for themselves, they only went to the Bois "at the lovers' hour," in order to breathe the perfume of a lovely evening, not to exhibit toilettes. Léonce there chose from preference the shady paths where one can walk arm-in-arm without having to think of the passers-by.

Sometimes they went to the theatre, but it was for the play itself, and not for the audience. Lucie was indifferent, at least, in appearance, to the renown of figuring at first performances together with "all Paris."

It was after two years of this secluded existence, during which not a cloud had come to dim their blue sky, that the young woman met her dearest school friend, Marthe du Plessy, at the Saint-Lazare railway station.

IV

On the evening of the ball given by Marthe, Lucie arrived early, as had been agreed, in order to assist her friend in her duties of hostess. The countess was still occupied with her toilette.

"How do you find me?" Lucie asked her, throwing a glance at the mirror. "I ask that," she added in a lower tone, "because excepting the fête of Sainte-Catherine at the convent, this is my first appearance at a ball."

As she protruded her little feet shod in satin towards the fire, a sensation of coldness on her bent neck, drew a faint cry from her.

"See!" exclaimed Marthe, laughing, "this is the first time that a diamond necklace ever frightened a woman. It is a present from my husband, my dear, for the anniversary of our marriage. Is he not gallant? And how beautiful it is! Ah! how it becomes you! Look at yourself!"

If a reproach could have been made to Lucie's beauty, it could only have been that it possessed less brilliancy and perfection than the ornament. The diamonds, which threw the lustre of their light on the rather dull whiteness of her skin, lent her an ideal brilliancy. With her eyes softening with pleasure, she passed her trembling fingers over the facets of each stone. It seemed as though she could not take her eyes from them. Marthe smiled.

"Wear it this evening," she said.

"What are you thinking of?"

"Why should you not keep it on? I did not intend to wear it. I am in my own house, and here is a set of jewels which will harmonise much better with my toilette and the necessary simplicity of the occasion."

"Ah! my dear," said Lucie, bending backwards to judge of the effect of her train, "there is nothing like a ball-dress for showing off a woman's beauty!"

Do you think, reader, that any one can be in love with a necklace? This unheard-of thing happened, however, to Lucie. She trembled every minute at the contact of the luminous stones which in the wild motion of the waltz rose and fell on her neck, as she would have done at a kiss or a bite; a sort of madness carried her away rather than her light feet, and as she passed the large Venetian mirrors, her eyes threw at them shining glances which rivalled with the rays of the jewels, the cause of her intoxication.

The ball was splendid. The countess's fêtes were justly renowned for their magnificence and their good taste. Doubtless the atmosphere of elegance, the music, and the flowers, contributed to intoxicate Lucie, who beheld all this for the first time.

At last Léonce went to tell her that it was getting late.

"So soon?" she said.

However, without adding another word, she took her husband's

arm and went with him into Marthe's boudoir. Then, while Léonce went to find a maid, she approached the mirror and gave herself that look that all young women give as they leave a ball, to see if their beauty has kept all its promises to the last.

At this moment a slight noise disturbed her.

"Who is there?" she asked, for the room was half-dark. "Who is there?" she repeated.

"Excuse me," said Baron George, rising and going towards her. "I am afraid I seem very indiscreet. I was resting here dreaming, waiting for the waltz you promised me."

"And you went to sleep?"

"No, madame; but with my eyes shut I was following a dream. And the hoped-for waltz could alone have had the power to drag me from it; at its first notes I opened my eyes and saw you. Will you take my arm?"

"I beg your pardon; we are getting ready to leave."

"What, without paying your debts?"

"My husband——"

"What is it, my dear?" asked Léonce, who now entered the room again.

"I was begging madame to fulfil her engagements," said the baron.

"I am really a little tired. Good-bye, Monsieur George; excuse me," she said, stretching out her hand to the young man, who held it a little longer than was necessary before he returned to the drawing-room.

Lucie went and stood in front of her husband, bending before him her pretty neck, over which a quantity of little brown curls clustered. Like a loving husband, Léonce only understood one thing by this gesture, and he printed a long kiss on his wife's neck.

"But do you not see the clasp there?" And the young woman's delicate fingers felt impatiently for the clasp of the necklace.

"Ah! excuse me, dear. I forgot that glass-ware, which you love this evening better than your husband."

"But do take it off," continued Lucie, almost vehemently, for her nerves were decidedly over-excited.

From that day, a thousand good reasons were always at hand for breaking up the plans of retirement at first formed by Monsieur and Madame de Sudres. Were the latter's secret wishes felt by her husband? or was he himself, without knowing it, flattered by his young wife's success?

They spent the winter amid pleasure of all kinds. Lucie seemed resigned to the prospect of a fixed appointment in Paris; she even attempted to show her husband that the difficulties of housekeeping, which at first had so frightened them, were greatly exaggerated. It was only necessary to know the secrets of Parisian life, and the latter, once well studied by an intelligent woman, furnished unexpected solutions. She trusted, in a short time, to be able to balance her budget without undergoing many privations, and also without

prejudice to the requirements of their situation in life. She understood now how her husband's future might be helped on from the connections they would surely make by cultivating society. All the petty Government intrigues, the speedy advancements had formerly so puzzled them ; but of all those Parisian mysteries Lucie now had the key. And what city was as indulgent as Paris as regards people's means ? And how many resources it possessed of all kinds ! Not only as regards material life, which, all things considered, was less costly than in the provinces, but also in reference to the question of dress, this latter not being the least important. In fact, in Paris there were none of those narrow rivalries which oblige one to keep a double entry of all politenesses received and to be returned. And besides all these reasons—of doubtful value, in truth—did not Léonce risk seeing his powers wasted and his talents forgotten in a provincial town ?

Persuasion is feminine and knows how to become both specious and amiable. The two families, now inseparable, gaily looked forward to the approaching spring. George de Valrens, Marthe's brother, without making himself a nuisance, knew how to be always ready with some new pleasure. He it was who got up little dinners at the restaurants, who offered the wished-for box at the talked-of first performance, who was the gay element at all their parties, the scapegrace that was always scolded, but whose follies always amused. Did he not always bring a harvest of chit-chat with him, which the two curious women listened to with half-closed ears, amused to hear of matters pertaining to another world ?

About this time Lucie discovered quite a treasure of a maid. Was it owing to her clever and economical help that she was able to rival her friend in elegance ? At all events, better informed now than the Countess Marthe on the weak points of the fashionable dressmaker, and on the principal qualities of the bonnet-maker of the day, she might have given clever and instructive lectures to the brilliant circle that sets the fashion.

It is whispered that more than one "artist," very justly enamoured of his art, dresses, simply for renown's sake, some pretty worldlings fitted to show off their toilets to the best advantage. Was this Lucie's secret ? We would rather suppose that, skilful in imitating a good cut and a happy combination of colours, and that by attending the cheap sales which such and such shops advertised on certain days, she had at last contrived to solve the problem that had seemed so terrible to her at the opening of this story.

V.

It was the beginning of April, a most brilliant time of the year for the Bois de Boulogne. Every day at about four o'clock Lucie and Marthe went there together. Léonce, meanwhile, devoted himself

to his work. Ambitious for his wife's sake, he hoped some day to be able to give her the luxuries that suited her so well. Although the trees were still leafless, their branches, ruddy and full of sap, gave forth a promise of the approaching Spring, and sweet scents and brightness began to fill the air. Every one was making plans for the summer, and while a last moment was given to balls, the attention of society was centred in the coming steeplechases that were to open the racing season.

Idly reclining on the cushions of an elegant landau, Lucie abandoned herself to the charm of being looked at and envied ; with her little hand in a lilac glove leaning on the edge of the carriage, she beat the time of a favourite operetta tune while she and her friend planned a round of fresh pleasures. Behind them rode George on his thoroughbred horse, and with a white camelia at his button-hole. He came to the carriage door from time to time, and spurred up his horse to show off his well-known talents as a rider.

"Are you not coming to-morrow?" said Marthe to Lucie.

"I think you can rely on me," the latter answered, drawing herself up, and displaying her slender and supple figure : "Léonce can go by himself to Nantes. Why do you smile?"

"I was thinking to myself how completely I have converted you to my way of thinking that so scandalised you a year ago, Ah ! if the victims of matrimony only knew how to lengthen their chains there would be fewer breaks. Listen to the clause I made my future husband agree to without a word of argument. Ah ! I made my programme before the '*fatal yes*:' well, that programme was equal liberty, and absolute mutual independence."

Just then the horses started off at a fast trot. Was it their quickened pace and the heightened breeze that had sprung up around the carriage that so suddenly animated Lucie's complexion? Fortunately her veil, which fell in long folds behind her, was blown forward and hid her face.

It is said that a woman's heart is a labyrinth full of dark corners, and that no man is able to lay hold of the guiding thread that would lead him through this maze. Did Marthe, as a woman, read her friend's heart? At all events she added :

"This is anything but a reproach, dear. I only wished to point out the truth of the axiom : 'The tamer is always at last devoured by the lion.'"

"But I do not quite see the analogy——"

"Why, nature triumphs over education ; the lion is your character, the tamer, a weak woman's good resolutions, and—you know the rest."

"What on earth are you talking so seriously about?" interrupted George, coming up at this moment.

"Marthe is giving me a lecture on philosophy," replied Lucie.

"Then I shall ride away."

"Who are you betting on to-morrow?" now asked the young woman, turning towards the baron.

"Vesta, she's the favourite; will you go halves with me?"

VI.

A FAREWELL ball was to close the countess's receptions, and of course Lucie was to be present. A few minutes before starting Léonce went to his wife's room where she was waiting for him.

"Why, here are some jewels I did not know you possessed," he remarked, touching a necklace which was half hidden by the opera cloak.

"Is it not lovely?"

"One could swear those were real diamonds."

"Yes, almost. I thought them so beautifully imitated that I could not resist buying them—5000 francs! Only fancy! Ah! it took all my new year's savings! Are you angry?"

"Well, I don't like to see you wearing false diamonds. I would rather you left that kind of thing to people of a certain class."

"But it is a thing very commonly done in our set. A lot of women wear false diamonds for fear of losing their real ones. And then Marthe's necklace was always before my eyes."

"Coquette!"

"I belong to my sex!" she replied, bending her head in affected humility.

Summer separated the two families, and on the return of Lucie and her husband to Paris George also came back to the capital; but Marthe was in Italy, where her husband had a great many friends.

One day George, Léonce, and Lucie, all three, had gone for a country walk, and Léonce, for a joke, tried to drag his wife down the rapid slope of a hill, when suddenly she stopped, and languidly leaning against her husband's shoulder:

"Take care, dear," she said, "do not make me walk so fast."

Then she whispered a word in his ear, and from that day forth nearly all their talk was about the little child they now expected; the care to be taken of it, the way it would be brought up, its future, and so on. Léonce wished his wife to take every possible precaution for the safety of the treasure she was bearing. His kindness and love to her were doubly great, and the whole time now was one long, delicious intoxication, full of sweetest hopes.

Still, despite this devoted care, Lucie's health soon gave her husband cause for serious alarm. His fears, indeed, were but too well justified. With the first cry of the newly-born babe its mother drew her last breath. Nothing could describe the husband's grief. For some weeks he was quite mad, and his life was despaired of. To get him out of this state the doctor contrived to interest him in his paternal duties. He advised his relatives, who had hastened to Paris, to leave him alone with the child. It then fell to Léonce's

lot to attend to all those small cares for which he had been used to rely on others.

The nurse, to whom previous instructions had been given, consulted with him on everything, and as a result of the incessant supervision thus cleverly forced upon him, his heart awoke from its painful torpor.

His son! For months past he had thought and dreamt of this baby that was to be born; he had in imagination seen it trying to walk for the first time; he had seen it a child and a grown man, and then a catastrophe and a terrible darkness had suddenly shut out those dreams, and he had almost cursed the innocent cause of his grief. But when he saw the tiny creature surrender itself to him; when his fatherly affection awoke amid the agony of death, near the cradle of this child, who held out its arms to him as if he had power to stop its suffering, then he began to love it passionately, and with all the strength of the regret he felt for the wife who had gone. It was a touching sight to watch him carry the little sufferer about. What efforts to lift this little burthen! How sublimely awkward he was in placing the little boy properly in the bed-clothes! With his head leaning against the cradle he would often sit there lost in thought, watching the uncertain movements of the small pink hands busy with their toys.

A year passed in this way, and then Léonce was obliged to attend to work; moreover, his long-expected appointment in his native town had at last been granted to him.

He foresaw that his stay there would be protracted, as the work that was to be carried out there would require several years' supervision. He therefore determined to get rid of his Paris furniture.

In the midst of all these cares a crowd of things that had been confusedly hidden away during the first few months of his misfortune came before his eyes. It was a most painful trial. Some of the clothes still retained, as it were, the shape of the dear lost one; others were impregnated with the scents she had used. It seemed as if a part of herself had come to life again, and all Léonce's aching memories were acutely aroused.

He had at last summoned up courage to open the little desk in which Lucie had been wont to keep her papers. A half-written letter, some unfinished accounts—everything showed life suddenly broken off. His sad task was many times interrupted by his tears. With some small trinkets that he put on one side to get rid of he placed the necklace of false diamonds which his wife had worn but once, and which was neither very interesting as a souvenir nor worth much. The next day, taking a cab, he called at the jeweller's named by Lucie as having sold her the ornament, and asked him to take it back at a certain loss. A smile broke over the shopkeeper's face as he gave the necklace back to Léonce.

"Really, sir, I should do a splendid stroke of business," he said, "if, availing myself of your mistake, I accepted your proposal."

"How so?"

"These diamonds are real and of the finest water."

"A most perfect imitation, I believe."

"No, sir, no! the necklace is at least worth twenty-eight or thirty thousand francs."

"Impossible!"

"Well, ask Messrs. Turner & Humbolt themselves. See, this is their mark, they mounted this necklace, and you will find them confirm what I say."

"Your word is sufficient, sir," said Léonce, and he went away apparently quite calm.

"Rue de la Paix," said he to his cabman, giving him the address of the celebrated lapidists just mentioned.

"This necklace was mounted by your firm, sir?" he asked of one of the partners, who at once answered:

"Yes, sir, it was."

"Could you give me the date of the day it was bought? The person it belonged to is dead, and this information might perhaps be useful to her heirs."

"The sale of a necklace of this value isn't common enough to make the finding of the date difficult. Baron George de Valrens bought this necklace last March, I think, for the sum of thirty thousand francs. Yes, indeed, here is the proof of my statement," added the lapidist, who had been turning over the leaves of his sale-book.

"Many thanks."

Calm and very pale, Léonce bowed without adding another word. As he got into his cab again his heart was beating violently.

When he reached home the unhappy man rushed to the little desk, over which, only a few hours ago, he had shed so many bitter tears. He suddenly remembered a strange circumstance. On the day before her death Lucie, who had a presentiment of her approaching end, had sent him out of the way under an odd pretext. Having returned sooner than she expected him, he had detected a strong smell of burnt paper, of which he still saw the traces in the fireplace. He now remembered his wife's blush and her emotion when he innocently made a remark about it.

"Ah!" he cried, crunching under his feet the dear relics which he had so religiously put together that morning, "the wretch! the wretch!"

So this woman whom he had so loved and mourned had deliberately deceived him, each day acting an ignoble comedy. Hypocritical modesty! Maidenly blushes! All with her was a lie.

He pictured her again, with her unconscious grace, leaning on his arm in a ball room, and whispering in his ear that she only wished to be lovely for him—when another was expecting her!

But that man, thank God! he knew his name, that George, his so-called friend!

At that instant there was a knock at the door.

"Who is there?" called Léonce.

"Papa! Papa!" lisped a faint, uncertain voice.

"The child is not well," added the nurse. "I wish, sir, you would——"

His son! He had forgotten him—the treachery had, as yet, only crushed the husband. Now, however, the blow fell on the father.

This little creature whom he had loved, petted, watched over, and nursed in his arms, was, perhaps, not his own son after all. Then in a terrible rage, snatching the child from his nurse: "Leave me!" said he.

The trembling nurse obeyed.

"Oh! if you could but answer me!" cried Léonce, passionately, straining to his breast the fragile being whom that morning he had still called his son.

"He has blue eyes and light hair—like his mother—like George, too," he muttered.

"Papa! Papa!" said the child.

Léonce leant forward. But the kiss stopped half-way on his frozen lips.

"And it would always be so," he murmured in a husky voice. "This horrible doubt would pursue me every day with each look, with each caress."

Then he called in the nurse, and gave her the child.

It was a lovely June evening. Through the open windows came sweet-smelling breezes; a few steps away, in the shady paths of the Parc Monceau, young lovers walked, smiling to each other and looking forward to many long, bright years.

Léonce leant over the balcony and remained lost in deep thought. When he awoke from his meditation he went and opened the case in which he kept his revolver.

About midnight the noise of a report brought the anxious servants to his room. He was dead.

"Poor man! It was grief. He was so fond of his wife. Such a united couple!" whispered the servants round the corpse.

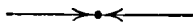
George de Valrens probably thought otherwise, when on waking he received the news of the suicide, with a green leather jewel-case bearing Lucie's monogram.

Baron George has now become a very serious-minded man. He sits in the Chamber of Deputies, and affectionately patronises a young man who strangely resembles him, young Max de Sudres, for whom the Countess Marthe on her side shows quite maternal care.

Has the necklace made any more victims? I am forced to fear it has, for I am assured this is not the first time that some such story as this one has been told.

EMILE JOUAN.

A MODERN BORGIA.



It was at Naples. I shall not amuse myself by describing to you that city, where the soil palpitates amid the throbbing of the fiery crater ; where everything is picturesque, the sky, the earth, and the inhabitants ; where, on this hand, you see palaces, and on the other lazzaroni, living and sleeping in the sun.

The Neapolitan women are beautiful, their figures are supple, their eyes flash fire, and it is more difficult to keep yourself from loving them than it is to abandon yourself to their seductions.

George de Morels and his cousin Edouard had arrived at Naples a fortnight previously, and, as is the duty of strangers, they were, with the aid of guide-books, visiting the sights and monuments of the city. The *far niente*, which is habitual with the people of Southern Italy, had gained a little upon the two friends, and during the excessive heat they used to retire to their rooms to enjoy a *siesta* and a chapter of a congenial novel. One morning, after a most refreshing dewy night, George proposed to Edouard that they should go out for a ride. Neither of them knew the environs of Naples. They started on frisky horses amid the brilliant sunshine. In a joyous mood they went on and on, chatting and galloping gaily. Several miles along the road they discovered a lengthy avenue, at the end of which appeared a villa.

"Let's go down the avenue," said Edouard to George.

"All right," replied George, and they turned their horses under the spreading trees.

Two minutes later they alighted, a valet took their horses, and an old housekeeper invited them to enter the dining-room, where, as if they had been expected, the cloth was already laid. The two cousins took their seats, attributing their good fortune to some mistake.

"Ask somebody," whispered George to his companion, whereupon Edouard called, and the valet re-appeared.

"Do you expect company?" he asked.

"No, since your lordships have arrived."

"To whom does the villa belong?"

"To the Signora Lucrezia the beautiful."

"Can we present our compliments to your mistress?"

"Her wine is good, and her table amply served. Drink, eat, my

lords ; do not ask questions but wait. The rest will come in time." With these words the valet made a low bow and retired.

The ride had sharpened the appetites of the two young men, and they did justice to the hospitality of the invisible Lucrezia ; the wine got into their heads and they imagined any number of things about the beautiful unknown, each more or less improbable.

"She has grown old and lost her teeth or her hair, I expect," whispered George in Edouard's ear, between two glasses of wine.

"She is shutting herself up with some Renaud," suggested Edouard.

"Perhaps she is an Ariadne abandoned."

"No, a guilty wife hiding her shame."

"At all events we must see the thing out."

"No, the wisest course would be to remount our horses and to return to Naples."

"Well, as we have been told to wait, let us wait."

When their repast was over coffee and liqueurs were served, and they were invited to pass into the smoking-room, and thence into the billiard-room, the windows of which overlooked a park.

Scarcely had they entered this latter room when some delicious music arose from the shrubbery ; they went out, and just then a sweet female voice was blended with the sound of the instrument.

"It is the lady of the villa," said Edouard.

"The angels do not give sweeter concerts," replied George.

While listening they peered about ; then, as the singing ceased, a rustling, as it were of silk, was heard, a light foot stepped across the lawn, and for an instant a form became visible amid the trees ; it was she, Lucrezia, still more beautiful than she was said to be.

"Shall we not see her again ?" murmured George.

"Patience !" replied Edouard.

And springing forward each took a different path. But the fair unknown fled swiftly through the mazy paths, and they soon lost trace of her. An hour passed ; the lost friends called to each other, their voices came closer, and they returned to their starting-point.

"Did you see her ?" asked Edouard.

"Yes, she smiled at me. She is an angel !"

"No, no, we ought to fly from her dangerous glances."

"Perhaps you are right ; but she told us to wait."

"Look yonder, what do you see coming ?"

"Our horses."

"It is our dismissal."

"So much the worse ; I thought that we were only at the first chapter of a romance of chivalry, of which I was the hero."

"And Lucrezia the heroine ?"

"It was a sweet dream."

"It was my dream, too ; but like you I must bring it to an end."

Their horses were there, so they mounted, and soon the villa and the avenue disappeared behind them.

"Do you know, cousin, what has happened to me?" said George.
"The valet slipped a note from her into my hand as we left."

"And she's written to me too."

"To give you an appointment?"

"Yes, to give me an appointment."

"Mine is for to-morrow, at ten o'clock in the evening."

"Mine is for the day after to-morrow, at the same hour."

"Is she a courtesan?"

"Who knows? We ought to avoid this mysterious woman."

"You don't mean to go, then?"

"Who would prevent me doing so?"

"I would!"

"What madness!"

"It would be madness to accept her love."

A spell of silence followed, and the horses went so rapidly that in less than an hour's time the two friends were back in Naples.

"I shall not lose sight of you," said Edouard to his cousin.

"But if I promise you not to return to the Villa Lucrezia?"

"Not even if you promise."

"I shall escape you, then."

"I defy you to do that."

"We shall see."

The rest of the day the two friends might have been seen together. In the evening, at about nine o'clock, they went to the theatre. George, very agitated, attempted to go out; but his friend retained him. By brusqueness he would have irritated him; however, by affectionate advice he induced him to remain, and thus on the following day George was not at the appointed assignation.

Two days passed. Towards nine o'clock one morning, as they were taking their breakfast at the Café Français, a waiter gave George a note containing these simple words: "If you are a true knight, you will remember the Villa Lucrezia, and the tenth hour." George made a sign to the bearer of the note, implying: "I will go," and continued his repast without allowing his companion to perceive any symptoms of his emotion. But Edouard thought that he had recognised the valet of the Villa Lucrezia, disguised as a waiter. He did not question his friend, but watched him.

In order to deceive his cousin, George feigned a calmness which he did not feel. When evening came on, he had a horse saddled at some distance from the hotel, and, pretending indisposition, he returned home, in order to throw Edouard off the track.

His stratagem succeeded, as he had foreseen it would; but twenty minutes later, Edouard, after knocking in vain at his friend's door, had it broken open, and then, not finding him in the room, he started in pursuit of him, taking the route of the Villa Lucrezia.

George, who arrived first, alighted. While he was seeking for a bell or a knocker at the gate of the villa, the valet who had given him the note in the morning appeared.

"This way, signor, my mistress is waiting for you."

"Is she a fairy, a woman, a demon, or an angel, your mistress?"

"She is what she is; leave your horse in my care, you will find it again here. The signora is coming to meet you."

George entered the courtyard. Lucrezia was waiting for him there, and made signs to him to follow her, but without uttering a word. They traversed a long corridor in which there were several doors. The young women opened one of these, and motioned George to enter a room. The moon lighted up this room with its pale rays. Everything in it had a strange air of mystery.

"Chevalier," said Lucrezia, after closing the door, "do you not find my conduct strange?"

"If you love me, I shall esteem myself the happiest of men."

"You have been remarked, you are loved, and it shall be proved to you." And then she kissed George on the brow.

"Oh! my queen! My life for your love!" he cried.

"Your life! If I asked it, would you give it to me?"

"Without hesitation."

"Would you deliver me from an enemy?"

"I would kill him!"

"But you would have no one to kill."

"Oh! I will not suffer a rival," he answered, falling at her feet.

She raised him up. "Listen," she said; "a man loved me—I loved that man——"

"Do you say that in order to throw me into despair?"

"There is no question of you in this, but of a villain who betrayed me, and on whom I have revenged myself."

"What do you mean?"

"That I have killed my lover."

"Forget him, and let my love efface his very souvenir."

"I must first have a pledge of your obedience."

"Speak!"

"My father is severe on the point of honour. He went away three months ago, and left me to take care of myself. In his absence I received my seducer; he deceived me; I have punished him."

Then, drawing aside a curtain, Lucrezia took a taper and threw a light on a corpse lying in the bed, adding: "Do you understand?"

"You wish——"

"To see you take that corpse away; for my father will arrive to-morrow, and, if he suspects the truth, he will kill me."

George remained silent; and then Lucrezia resumed:

"Do you hesitate? After all, what does it matter to you if I die; you hardly know me, you cannot believe in my love, it is fatal!"

She turned upon him the fire of her eyes, and then he cried aloud: "Order, command me, Lucrezia, I am yours."

"Take, then, this body on the back of your horse, go as far as

the first precipice on the road ; there, on the brink of the abyss, you can leave it—the rest belongs to God !”

George would have defied half a dozen men ; but the sight of a corpse and the idea of touching it deadened his energy.

“ You falter ? ” added Lucrezia. “ A glass of my cordial will set you right. I will drink with you. Now ! to your health.”

Their glasses clinked ; then she helped George to place the corpse on his horse, and dismissed him with these words :

“ In an hour, here, I shall expect you.”

The horse was stamping impatiently ; George mounted, and holding this lifeless body before him, he started on the road to Naples. His steed dashed onward, made restive by the legs of the corpse which were dangling against his sides.

Suddenly a horseman galloped up and stopped short in front of George, exclaiming : “ Is it you ? ”

“ Yes, Edouard, it is I—the most imprudent and unhappy of men. Look at my burden.”

“ A corpse ? ”

“ Which I am going to throw to the crows ! ”

“ What ? Lucrezia ? ”

“ She is waiting for me. This man was her lover ; she killed him for his infidelity. You see this ravine ? That is his bier : people will think that he fell in.”

“ You shall not do that, George ! We will take the body to Naples, put it into the hands of the police, and denounce Lucrezia.”

“ A dead man in our hands ? We should be accused ourselves. Here is the chasm, and here I leave my burden.”

The mutilated body rolled down to the bottom of the abyss.

George now tried to turn his horse, and repeated to Edouard :

“ She told me to return in an hour’s time. She is waiting.”

But suddenly Edouard saw him turn pale, stagger, and then fall.

“ Friend,” murmured George, “ it is in the dwelling-place of the shades that Lucrezia is waiting for me—before an hour has passed we shall both of us die, she and I. I understand it all now—that cordial was poison.”

“ No, George ; no, my friend, my brother, you will live, you will live,” pleaded Edouard.

But George died, and, indeed, on the following day the newspapers announced the death of Lucrezia. Her death was attributed to the jealous vengeance of a Frenchman.

Edouard at once left Naples ; later on, perhaps, he might have been taken for the guilty one.

E. NIBOYET.

THE END.

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